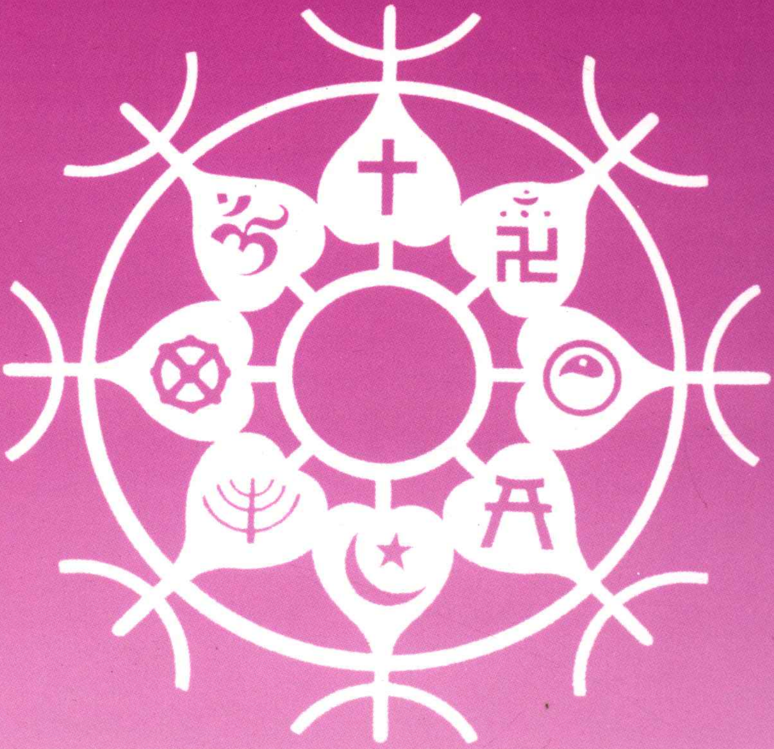
JOURNAL OF
DHARMA



SEX AND RELIGION: CONTEMPORARY RESPONSES

January-March 2009 Vol. 34, No. 1

JOURNAL OF DHARMA

Dharmaram Journal of Religions and Philosophies

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JOURNAL OF DHARMA

January-March 2009 Vol. 34, No. 1

SEX AND RELIGION: CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES

Published by
Dharma Research Association
Centre for the Study of World Religions
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Editorial

SEX AND RELIGION

Contemporary Responses

The fact that human societies from the beginning had a normative approach to everything related to sex and sexuality is indisputable, whether its source was religion or state, or the 'private' conscience of an individual. It is also a fact that most of it has been evolving and changing over time. Although there had been continued and consistent attempts on the part of the libertines to ridicule and challenge the norms that were in place, they have not yet succeeded in overthrowing normative approaches to sexuality altogether, which, I think, is the case also with the most 'liberated' crusades of free sex. Yet, interestingly, we must also be open enough to admit the fact that despite all these norms, average human sexual behaviour (if we could go by the 'scientifically' conducted survey results that are made available to us in our present times) very seldom fits into the normative moulds, especially when it comes to the private lives of many individuals. It is also true that moral or legal norms with regard to sexual behaviour, to some extent, have tended to inflict people with a burdensome conscience, either of sin or of guilt, which is said to have resulted in enslaving them than ultimately facilitating a liberating experience that both religion and state are expected to provide. Then, does it amount to saying that there is no point in having moral norms with regard to the sexual behaviour of human individuals and societies? In this context, it is important to ask the simple question, why should there be norms – moral and/or legal – in the sphere of human sexual behaviour?

Sex and sexuality are inherent dimensions of human existence; in the process of becoming a human person and from the point of view of evaluating personality development, responses to one's own sex and sexuality are fundamentally important. Apart from considering sexuality as a psychosomatic endowment and a biological and emotional need, in the course of time, it has also assumed social, cultural, and religious dimensions. Sex was never a private affair and, therefore, the issues related to it should be deliberated upon from various angles so as to facilitate a healthy and wholesome approach to sex and sexuality, both individually and collectively.

The word 'sex' comes from the Latin expression, '*sexus*', which is originally derived from the verb *secare* and means to separate or to divide.

© 2009 *Journal of Dharma: Dharmaram Journal of Religions and Philosophies* (Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bangalore), ISSN: 0253-7222

Practically speaking, the word 'sex' and its extensive use have divided the whole human race (for that matter almost the entire animal kingdom) into two distinct groups of male and female. Although 'sex' divides the humanity into two groups,[1] a religious perspective shall approach it as a natural and fundamental aspect of human existence,[2] which is the most potent of all energies to enable human beings in effecting integration, unity, and oneness among themselves and with other beings, including God.

Sex had been an object of unflinching interest both from the laymen's and scholars' perspectives. Popular as well as scholarly opinions and literature abound in the area of sex and sexuality. Due to its importance, sex has also attracted a lot of concurrent researches, which have contributed a great deal in understanding various intricacies involved in it. It is true that availability of scientific information gradually transforms public opinion and value consciousness. Yet, the insistence that our value consciousness should always depend exclusively upon the available scientific information, especially to the total disregard of religious and moral wisdom, to my mind, tends to be a wayward approach,[3] especially when it comes to our understanding of and response to sex and sexuality.

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[1] From a scientific point of view, the physical features that contribute to the distinction of a human being into male and female include the following seven factors: (1) chromosomal sex, (2) gonadal sex, (3) hormonal sex, (4) internal accessory reproductive structures, (5) external sex organs, (6) sex of assignment and rearing, and (7) sexual self-identification.

[2] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, 60, 1, ad 3. Caution must be exercised in understanding sex as the most fundamental life force of a human being, especially as it has connotations of the Freudian psychoanalytic theory. Disassociating with the general trend of the psychoanalytic approach to sex in which sexuality is read into every human behaviour, the general trend today is to assume that sexuality is a vital energy fundamental to human existence and may positively or negatively affect a human being depending upon the approach that one (along with the others) adopts to it. Sex, though fundamental, unlike the Freudians have assumed it, shall not be seen as *the* underlying motive of every human activity.

[3] While science gives us a lead in understanding various dimensions of reality, hitherto unknown and unexplored, it would be foolish to think that science is completely objective and neutral. Every science, and for that matter every scientist, has a subjective point of view, and moves ahead in his/her scientific researches basing on that point of view. It is true that by and large scientists are bound to change

In our contemporary society, it is sad to observe that one of the most sublime dimensions of human existence, sex, has been manipulated to serve the interests of the market economy. Without any exaggeration it could be said that sex-related industry is one of the most thriving throughout the human history, which does not seem to have had any adverse effect due to the financial crisis that has shook the lives people all over the world.[4] Sexual fulfilment understood as a human need does not happen without a properly cultured interpersonal matrix, which is very hard to come by if everything goes by the market dynamics oriented to profit aggrandizement. Due to this unique nature of attaining sexual fulfilment in human beings, sexual 'want' had been an issue that every human being encountered at one moment or the other in his or her life. As its fulfilment or attainment fundamentally required formation of other-respecting healthy attitudes, the other's life enhancing loving and caring practices, and the self- and the other-assuring commitment, cultivation of which is not very easy in a world that is thrust upon by egoistic perspectives and values, people encounter difficulties in their sexual life, affecting the other areas of life as well. It is the nature of sex that the more the denial of its fulfilment, the greater the craving for it, unless there are higher and nobler causes or motivations that animate the mind and soul of the person concerned.

It is natural that there are many men and women who yearn for sexual fulfilment, although they may not easily realize it in their given circumstances. Identifying this delicate situation triggered the ingenuity of the market economy. Where sexual fulfilment remains a very powerful need, which is not easy to come by – especially in the absence of healthy or wholesome humane attitudes, such as loving dispositions, caring

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their points of view depending on the results or findings, though mostly it remains merely a theoretical aspiration or ideal.

[4] A recent issue of *U.S. News & World Report* was devoted to the astounding rise of the sex business in America. It said: "Last year Americans spent more than $8 billion on hardcore videos, live sex acts, adult cable programming, sexual devices, computer porn and sex magazines – an amount much larger than Hollywood's domestic box office receipts and larger than all the revenues generated by rock and country music albums. Americans now spend more money at strip clubs than at Broadway, Off-Broadway, regional and non-profit theatres, at the opera, the ballet, and jazz and classical music performances – combined." "From the Congressional Record, November 8, 1997." http://groups.csail.mit.edu/mac/classes/6.805/articles/cda/coats-nov-97.txt (January 2009).

practices, and self- and other-assuring commitment – selling sex-related pleasure and sex-clad pseudo-fulfilment have assumed larger market proportions. For example, it is common knowledge that prostitution is as old as human social existence; despite legal and moral repression of such practices all through the civilized era, the market related to sex and sexuality continues to thrive. In fact, with the arrival of modern communication media and information technology, operation of 'sex market' has assumed greater proportions, whereby marketing agencies of sex related services have begun to enjoy a thriving global client-base. The spurt of internet-based pornography, for example, has made the availability of sexual 'pleasures' easy and cheap all over the world.

The question, however, that we need to ask ourselves is whether all these market techniques to amass profit by tapping into one of the intense human needs is justifiable? Does marketing of sex-related 'pleasures' really enable human persons to attain sexual fulfilment on its own? Is sexuality something that could be restricted to a mere mechanical exercise of human sexual organs? Human sexuality, beyond its mere physical dimensions both in terms of genital pleasures and reproductive aspects, is a very subtle and delicate human existential power capable of effecting mutually enhancing human relationships, primarily through the intense but lifelong commitment and love that two individuals of opposite sex could intentionally establish and maintain. The most interesting aspect of it is that such a relationship functions as the matrix where experience of love would contribute to the commitment between the partners, and their mutual commitment would enhance the experience of love on an ongoing basis.

The market, in association with all its subtle collaborators (media being a key ally), is so strong that imparting any value consciousness in the society as to the lasting sexual commitment and mutually enhancing love between two persons of opposite sex is being consistently and deliberately ridiculed and presented as repressive of the human spirit. Unfortunately, an average person pulled and pushed by the market forces does not realize the fact that their apparent 'concern and love' for the 'good' of the public interests, especially in matters pertaining to sexuality, do not come from their love for the good of individuals or the common good; instead it is oriented only to the good of those who plan and execute business strategies to bring larger proportions of profit. As the media accompanies most of such moves – the media too thrives on sensitising human needs and makes better profit when it manipulates those fundamental human wants – it bombards the society with information flow so as to effect a growing consciousness among the larger public that would crave for more and more sexual fantasies and fulfilment, which most of the normal human interpersonal relationship or family relationship cannot, but only the depersonalized sex industry can supply. This is so, especially because the sex industry blows the sexual needs and fantasies of human beings out of proportion and present them as absolutely impossible to be realized in any lasting relationship between two human beings of opposite sex; then, the market alternative would sound to be the only possible avenue for sexual fulfilment, if one should go by the sexual fantasies painted by the media and market.

There is a subtle and alarming move that the media and the market together make in containing any initiative based on value consciousness. Market forces move hand in glove to ridicule agencies such as religion, educational institutions, etc., which try to instil a value consciousness among the youngsters and the larger public. I am ready to concede to the fact that there had been negative excesses on the part of various religions in approaching matters pertaining to sex and sexuality. That does not, however, mean that every direction given by religions shall be looked down upon as if they are all unbecoming for human existence. Indeed, many an injunction of various religions had been capable of instilling value consciousness in many peoples over different generations, and they have been capable of retaining this precious and vital human energy oriented for human welfare and enhancement. What happens in the present era is the ongoing crusade of the media and market against religious wisdom so much so that any one who would lean towards religious perspectives is branded to be old-fashioned, traditional, and out of touch with contemporary reality. What is apparently real for the media is what they themselves project as the real. Seldom do we realize that the world the media paints is born out of their fantasies, which would ultimately enhance their private welfare through the aggrandizement of profit, which ultimately fails to contribute to the lasting welfare of the human race, especially in their dealings with issues of sex and sexuality.

Many a time, people make baseless allegations against various religions with blanket statements like "every censorship effort and every attempt at sexual repression still comes from religion" or "religion's interest in defining sex in terms of values is nothing less than raw assertion of power over the very meaning of humanity." On another extreme, some others are all praise for the Asian religions in terms of offering very positive and open attitude towards matters related to sex. To my mind, both these positions are wrong, as there are, on the one hand, many in the West, who have been capable of inculcating a positive attitude towards human sexuality and, on the other, many in the East who continue to harbour in the third millennium very negative and life- and sexuality-negating attitudes, scriptural writings, and practices, to say the least. What we must do today is neither to blame nor to praise the past religious injunctions and traditional practices in terms of their attitudes towards human sexuality, instead we must approach the issue of human sexuality in a holistic manner, which would be capable of enhancing our human existence, individually and collectively. Of course, I firmly believe that religious wisdom has a lot of good to offer in this regard. So, the modern approach, as far as I would advocate, should consist of a balanced blend of our contemporary scientific information regarding human anatomy and sexual responses, cultural evolution, and religious wisdom, so that human response with regard to sexuality will not be merely physiological or psychological, but characteristically 'human'.

An exclusively sexological or psychological approach to sex and sexuality needs to be abandoned (as they mostly tend to limit their purview on to the naturalistic, somatic, and sensualistic interpretation of human sexuality, many a time restricting it to mere eroticism); as they are so deep-seated in the human being, we need to cultivate an existential and integral approach so as to positively redeem sex and sexuality from the negative approaches that abound in human history,[5] whether their sources could be traced to religious or political decrees.

To a great extent, it is true that anti-sexuality attitudes perpetuated by religious authorities have inflicted untold human misery, especially on women. In some extreme cases of fundamentalist reading of the scriptures, religious authorities have been instrumental in letting the scriptural taboos function as guilt-vending machines for the faithful, leading them to a total denial of normal and natural sexual behaviour. If such instances were to occur in the contemporary era, then they create toxic influence in the minds of the faithful, apparently with scriptural foundation, which ultimately produces 'unholy' effect on them, whom I believe can attain holiness only in being and becoming 'human' in every sense.

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[5] For more information on how sex and sexuality were approached by human beings through the ages, see Reay Tannahill, *Sex in History*, New York: Stein & Day, 1980.

The restrictions with regard to sex, as maintained by religions such as Catholicism, are not to restrict everyone for the sake of restricting, as some writers tend to make us believe. For example, Bertram Russell, a noted British philosopher, has declared that a "morbid and unnatural" attitude toward sex is "the worst feature of the Christian religion." Further, the allegation that most of the traditional religions have harboured a 'loathing for the body' is also not totally true. Indeed, there have been negative approaches, unbecoming practices, brutal denials, etc., initiated by religious authorities. However, I hold that it had mostly to do with the upbringing and attitudes of the individuals in question and the social mores in which they were groomed: they were the children of their times. It is unfortunate that in certain cases they have crept into the mainstream thinking of these religions and the wider societies. Yet, a complete rejection of religious wisdom when it comes to human body, especially in our judgement on matters pertaining to sex and sexuality, is a dangerous and short-sighted approach. As the religious scriptures, in most cases, have resulted from a 'sedimenting' effect of various revolutionary and life-animating forces, movements, and peoples over a period of time (and most of the time, these going far beyond the mores of the given era), they shall be approached as signposts that the humanity can access so that better and holistic lives can be designed. Of course, that is not to suggest that we should be slaves to the content of religious scriptures and traditions; instead, we should be capable of imbibing the best from these scriptures, the lore of divinely inspired human wisdom, in our effort to design novel attitudes and perspectives, new forms and styles of life in the twenty-first century.

The whole series of lectures on the theology of body given by Pope John Paul II sends out very positive signals as to the creative way of looking at human being, especially body and sexuality.[6] It presents not a tone of denying or condemning human body, sexuality, and love, as it is wrongly alleged of the Catholic Church, but of recognizing, appreciating, and integrating the body as well as masculinity or femininity into the whole person. Of course, this integration that Christianity has visualized, as John Paul II has presented it, does not make room for licentiousness, but a very careful exercise of human freedom with higher goals which necessarily presupposes a value-imbued consciousness that would facilitate orientating every human endowment, including sexuality, to the final goal of attaining wholesome human existence beyond the limiting terrains of this temporal world. This needs integrating eros with ethos, or exercise of sexuality in tune with an ethical consciousness so that eros will not carry away the whole person, rather would be integrated into the whole person's ultimate goals, making human existence wholesome.[7] In one of his addresses, John Paul II comments on the creation of man and woman and their mutual complementarity:

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[6] John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan*, Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1997.

> In the mystery of creation, the woman was "given" to the man. On his part, in receiving her as a gift in the full truth of her person and femininity, man thereby enriches her. At the same time, he too is enriched in this mutual relationship. The man is enriched not only through her, who gives him her own person and femininity, but also through the gift of himself. The man's giving of himself, in response to that of the woman, enriches himself. It manifests the specific essence of his masculinity which, through the reality of the body and of sex, reaches the deep recesses of the "possession of self."[8]

Thus, from a Christian point of view, it is in the mutual interpenetration of two persons – man and woman – through giving and accepting of their selves, which existentially includes their masculinity and femininity, that they find the ultimate expression of bringing together eros and ethos in themselves; in fact, such a blending of selves ultimately leads to the Christic self-giving love (agape), to the communion of these two persons, and through that into the communion of all.

Moral norms in the sphere of sex and sexuality enable human beings to regulate the exercise of their sexual instinct, powers, and aspirations. As we have maintained that sexuality is one of the fundamental human dimensions, its exercise must be attuned to the attainment of the welfare of individual human beings as well as the larger society. Human history attests to the need of maintaining norms in the sphere of sexual exercises. Human life – individually and collectively – is in need of normative regulation, as these norms are derived or designed by employing human reason, understanding of human nature, and the aspirations as to what human beings have to finally realize. Reason, along with other human abilities, enables human societies to derive norms that would set the goals of the society as well as the tone of their social intercourse. Of course, identifying a set of norms in the arena of sexuality would include commandments and prohibitions. Instead of turning away from the existing commandments and prohibitions as unnecessary boundaries scrupulously imposed in bygone ages by irrelevant authorities, we need to identify the values and norms that have been found to be lasting in the human sojourn over the millennia. Although humanity has been evolving over the years, its sustenance as an integrally knit society that surges ahead to ever greater levels of existence has been facilitated and animated by the value consciousness that human beings have been abiding by.

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[7] Even in Plato's understanding, eros (though fundamentally egocentric) enables a human being to bridge the wedge between the world of senses and the world of ideas; it is such a powerful intermediary power that human beings are endowed with, an exercise of which leads to the attainment of the very human destiny (See *Symposio* 203, 211; *Repubblica* 514).

[8] John Paul II, "Man and Woman: A Mutual Gift for Each Other," *L'Osservatore Romano* (Weekly Edition in English), February 11, 1980, 1.

The most essential aspect that needs reemphasis in our contemporary times, I think, is the recognition of the person in whom sexuality is identified. The sexual potential that we discuss here, fundamental as it is, is found not in any other entity, but in a human person. Any exercise of this potential, therefore, presupposes that it would not hamper or belittle the person. Moreover, sexuality being so integral to the individual person, it shall not be approached in a casual manner, as it would take away the delicacies and sacredness associated with it.

The intimate and exclusive encounter that facilitates deeper and lasting sexual relationship among couples has to be insisted upon in an attempt to reaffirm and redeem the person who is involved in living his or her sexuality. The exercise of sexuality is one of the avenues of self-gift to the other. When two persons of the opposite sex exercise this self-gifting, they complement and complete human wholeness. As the intimate dimension of the person is being gifted to another person, what is to be exchanged upon is another person, ultimately facilitating the total self-gift of two individuals. As this gifting of the person is so total that there cannot be any other party involved in this relationship, i.e., it ultimately tends to be an exclusive relationship within which sexual self-gifting can be finally realized. This sets the stage for an ongoing and mutually enhancing encounter between two persons of opposite sex on a permanent basis.

In such a mutually enhancing relationship of a lasting nature, a mere mechanistic and physical understanding of sexuality should be avoided. As sexuality is a human potential, like any other human dimension, it should be approached in a humane manner. The unbridled exercise of sexual potential that the contemporary media seem to make us believe to be universal and necessary for human flourishing and self-fulfilment ultimately reduces human persons into mere vending machines of sexual pleasure. This is a degenerating perspective on humanity. A human person is more than his or her sexuality. It is in the integral or wholesome exercise of his or her powers, including sexuality that one continues to remain a human person. Therefore, both the neglect and the over-emphasis of sexuality need to be checked.

Although there is resistance towards religion, which is being consistently perpetuated by some media agencies to serve their own vested interests, there is no excuse for religions and religious authorities in shying away from their responsibilities. A genuine religion that serves to elevate human existence to the higher realms of the divine has a fundamental responsibility to provide direction to its members with regard to their life perspectives and actions. As sound directions in matters of sex are hard to come by these days, even the youngsters, who are said to be drifting away from religious structures, look forward to religious authorities for proper and timely interventions as to how they should proceed and what are the proper responses expected of a religious believer, especially when it comes to matters of sex. So, instead of thinking that any pronouncement on sex and sexuality would be branded prudish, religious authorities have a very serious obligation to provide ongoing guidance to believers (as well as to the nonbelievers in an indirect manner) to attain human wholeness through the proper exercise of their sexuality.

Religious leaders also have to learn to respond to human situations better. Many a time their responses to anything connected to sex drifts to unwholesome extremes, while they conveniently bypass many other issues that need better attention and uncompromising condemnation.[9] Though a bit too sarcastic, the following verse from a popular song puts it straight across: "Bullets fly like popcorn on the screen, recommended wholesome, nice and clean. Making love's the thing that can't be seen. Why?" Of course, I am not recommending the media's approach in making light of sexuality as a welcome move; there need to be restrictions in this regard so that better value consciousness and decorum could be maintained in our society, and children, especially, could be protected from unwarranted overdose of sexuality in their daily lives. The point, however, is just that those who raise alarm over the marketing of sexuality by the media, as it is unhealthy for our society as a whole, must be all the more vigilant and outspoken regarding the ill-effects of many other violence-boosting and life-negating initiatives of the media at the same time.

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[9] The Victorian Age, which had been too sensitive to any discussion on the sexuality of a child (as if the child was almost a-sexual in its existence till it became an adult) and almost prohibited anything related to it to be even spoken in public at the pretext of serving the good of the children and saving them from the ill-effects of sexuality, surprisingly, does not seem to have taken note of many children who were kept as slaves and had been employed in fields as well as in coal mines.

If children are provided with proper sex education, they would gradually not only learn to have the exercise of their sexual powers, but would be enabled to involve in healthy, wholesome sexual communication, that would enhance their individual as well as social consciousness and relationships. If trained positively and properly and in time, both male and female members of our society would be responsibly sensitive to the needs of others, instead of being self-centred. Moreover, every religion has a responsibility to help its members learn methods of proper and value-ridden sexual communication, so that their sexual abilities could be exercised for the good of the human society, and consciously avoid the ills that may emerge from an exercise that may be adjudged to be unwholesome. Parents, teachers, and state and religious authorities have to exercise their responsibility in providing basic information about sex and sexuality, which would gradually enable them to develop wholesome and proper response to their own sexuality. There is no excuse to those who shy away from this responsibility. It is possible, and it happens even today, that due to their own problematic upbringing or personality conflicts some parents, teachers, etc., would feel not at ease to deal with issues related to sex and sexuality. Although this is natural, political as well as religious authorities must design ways and means to tackle this complex situation so that the future generations of humanity could be enabled to acquire better perspectives and practices with regard to sexuality.

Persistent resistance that we encounter in matters pertaining to sexuality when it comes to its instruction could be due to the negative approach that has been adopted, both by religious and secular instructors. It is universal to develop an aversion to increasing amount of constraints being enforced upon by any leadership; even if they be tolerated at one point, it is bound to be resisted upon as human ingenuity and freedom always look for open space of the human spirit to grow and flourish. Instead of bombarding youngsters with a list of dos and don'ts, our age needs to design a plan of sex education that would enable them to understand their own sexuality, know the historical, cultural, and religious evolutions as to the exercise of sexual power in the development of humankind, its potential in enabling a person to attain his/her full human potential, the necessity of value consciousness in being and becoming human, which is equally applicable in matters pertaining to sexuality, etc.

One important lesson that the young members of our society need to learn is complete sexual equality. For, genuine love is possible only between two equals. More than an ideal, it is the need of our contemporary human society. The sexual liberation that has swept the western society has contributed a lot to this effect; the feminist movements, despite some of their negative and equality-denying approaches, also have been powerful in bringing to focus the necessity of sexual equality in our societies. The theory of "natural inferiority of women" needs to be approached as a badly intended myth – from political and religious spheres – which is in need of a total rejection and corrective action. Indeed, our contemporary society continues to reap the bad effects of such a position, which had been instrumental in segregating at least one half of the whole human population, and denying those members their rightful place and justice in society. Both men and women need to transcend their short-sightedness and overcome their unfounded fears with regard to any *pre-ordained* status of any particular group. That is again a myth, totally baseless as far as human beings are concerned.

In this context, it is very important that a holistic curriculum is introduced into the school and university programmes that would make room for understanding the nature of creation, place of human beings, and the necessity of emerging a society where both men and women would be treated on par. Of course, this general frame needs to be translated into the context of every society or nation. It is at the same time important that these students are enabled to see through some of the constraining and equality-denying ontological viewpoints that are perpetuated either by political or religious authorities, whether it is in the form of sacred religious scriptures or secular political constitutions. When it comes to constraining the human spirit, both of them have had adopted, at one time or another, more or less the same strategies, which shall be resisted upon and overcome if they denigrate human spirit and its wholesome flourishing. Often, it would be necessary that we approach these issues with an open mind, a mind of a sincere seeker. Instead of being shocked and withdrawn every time some new research findings on sex-related issues challenge our conventional wisdom or tend to break certain taboos, we shall approach the scientific explorations as opportunities for understanding the dynamics of human sexuality better, so that every element of this completely human dimension could be attuned to the holistic growth of human persons and societies.

Often, sex can be a source of intense human conflict; interestingly, the same sex has also the potential to turn out to be a source of intense human communion. It depends on the attitude or approaches that individuals and societies have entertained with regard to sex and sexuality that would ultimately determine whether it turns out to be a source of conflict or communion. A contemporary perspective on sex would call for initiating every approach to make it wholesome, so that an inherent potency of human person could be a source of strength and appreciation. Sexuality, therefore, needs to be approached from the perspective of a creative, wholesome, and interpersonal context, where the sublime human nature, which is inherently sexual and interpersonal in character, can be integrally enhanced for the good of the individual person concerned as well as for the good of the whole creation.

It is this realization that our society is in need of designing more constructive and life-enhancing approaches to sex and sexuality that has prompted *Journal of Dharma* to dedicate this issue for a detailed discussion on "Sex and Religion: Contemporary Responses." Six scholars dwell upon the positive dimensions of sex vis-à-vis religion (some of them critiquing certain negative trends prevalent in understanding even religious scriptures), and affirm that religious perspectives on sex, if approached properly, would pave the way for a creative response to life itself.

Approaching sexuality from a positive Christian perspective, Paulachan Kochappilly, in his article, "Sexuality as Invitation to Intimacy and Integration," presents it as an invitation to intimacy and integration. According to him, "sexuality is an invitation to bonding and to stay in bond. It is an invitation to enter into relationship. It helps foster relationships. It is an invitation to cultivate a culture of love. It is an invitation to cultivate a culture of life. It is an invitation to cultivate a culture of care." Moreover, marriage is presented as the only context of sexual love and life, which is sacramental as well as salvific for Christians, ultimately transforming lovemaking into a life-giving, unitive, and procreative act at the same time.

In another article, "Spirituality of Sex," by Kurian Perumpallikunnel, we come across with another avenue of approaching sex from a contemporary religious point of view. Countering the allegation that sex is physical and bodily, this article unveils the greater spiritual powers that can be unleashed through self-disciplining and spiritual motivation. It is not mere attainment of physical pleasure that enhances a human person, but his attainment of higher levels of spiritual consciousness. By unveiling the intricate dimensions of bridal mysticism, the author concludes that instead of "condemning sexuality as evil or sinful," the mystics "incorporated it into their practices, not physically but symbolically," leading to the establishment of bridal love that is "gentle, romantic, self-sacrificing, total, confident, trustful, caring, all leading to a lifelong deliberate course of action that begets peace, joy, and celebration."

Vatsyayana's *Kāmasūtra*, which is reduced to the status of a mere sex manual or book on eroticism in the contemporary world, is analyzed by Shaji George Kochuthara in his article, "*Kāma* without Dharma? Understanding the Ethics of Pleasure in *Kāmasūtra*." According to the author, "*Kāmasūtra* is a systematic study of the emotional and sensual nature of human impulses and of man-woman relationship." He undertakes an analysis of the worldview that is behind this work and finds that the intent of this work is to provide a positive and balanced approach to sex and sexuality (along with other *Puruṣārthas*), and to emphasize the value in enhancing human life as well as social existence.

Asghar Ali Engineer, a contemporary interpreter of Islamic sources, presents "A Liberative Approach to Issues of Muslim Women in India." Posing challenges to some interpretations offered by official interpreters of Islam, Engineer tries to build up a new approach, which is fundamentally based on the Qur'an that would set the stage to liberate women, who suffer for centuries under the repressions apparently attributed to the Islamic tradition. His prophetic voice urges his co-religionists to pursue self-criticism and reform of life vision and practices in tune with "the fundamental values and vision of life enshrined in the Qur'an" and, thus, "to empower Muslim women, to reduce rate of childbirth, to usher in religious and social reforms, there is a great need to improve general economic condition which, in turn, will improve educational status of

Muslim women and that, in turn, will bring in greater awareness for change."

"Sexual Dilemmas and Moral Reasoning: An Approach to Girls' Sexuality and Sexual Pleasure," by Vimala Chenginimattam, taking cue from the positive teachings of Pope John Paul II on the theology of the body, maintains that the contemporary crises in the arena of sexuality call for reclaiming of "the sacred ground of human sexuality." Situating her discussion in the problems that girls encounter in their sexual development and self-expression, which is curtailed by cultural, social, and religious taboos, and locating some of the answers provided by contemporary feminist authors, like Carol Gilligan, Vimala affirms that there is a need for "an acknowledgement of girls' *embodied sexual feelings*." Identifying the necessity of moral orientation in sexual education, the article calls for "a change in our worldview, especially pertaining to the world of girls and women, which highlights their true feelings, knowledge, and experience."

Finally, in a reflective article, "An Epistle of St. Paul on Sex: A Pauline Response to Issues of Sex in Contemporary Society," by Benny Nalkara, offers a modern Christian theological response to the contemporary questions pertaining to sexuality. The author, juxtaposing himself in the place of St. Paul, whose epistles have been accused of lacking a balanced view on matters pertaining to sex, offers an explanation of Pauline position on sex, clarifies certain confusions that have crept into the modern understanding of his writings, and tries to offer a constructive Pauline perspective in approaching the problems in the area of sex and sexuality that we encounter in the contemporary society. Interestingly, the article concludes the Pauline epistle by presenting sex as a blessing that enables us human beings to attain communion of persons.

So, this issue of the *Journal of Dharma* brings together contemporary reflections on sex and sexuality. All these articles approach sexuality from various angles of religions. Interestingly, all of them converge on the need of cultivating a positive attitude towards sex and sexuality, so much so that human wholeness – individually and socially – can be finally attained.

Indeed, sex as a physical and psychological endowment has many far reaching dimensions affecting the human person as a whole. In our attempt to avoid any mechanistic or physical understanding of sex and sexuality, the contemporary era is in need of pooling together all that sex and sexuality can effect in the life of an individual and society. Approaching sex as a tool to attain pleasure and individual fulfilment, a holistic approach calls us to take it to be a fundamental human vital energy that is capable of effecting lasting relationship between two individuals of opposite sex, and through them opening up the horizons of human communion to the rest of the humankind. If this could be attained, sexual power and the ensuing lasting relationship would ultimately turn out to be the cornerstone of a flourishing human person, on the one hand, and a stable, happy, and progressive human society, on the other.

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Journal of Dharma 34, 1 (January-March 2009), 19-35

SEXUALITY AS AN INVITATION TO INTIMACY AND INTEGRATION

Paulachan Kochappilly◆

1. Introduction

The discussion on human sexuality has been decisive on and reflective of a particular civilization. Down through the centuries sexuality has been in the limelight of human debate. It has occupied the central stage of human behaviour and continues to dominate the scene. In the course of history, there were times when sexuality was hallowed with divinity and at other times it was stripped off even its human dignity. A healthy understanding of sexuality is crucial for the wellbeing of persons in a society. It is important to hold that sexuality is for human beings, and not human beings for sexuality. A balanced approach to sexuality, therefore, is essential for decent and dignified human life. Christianity understands human sexuality as an invitation to intimacy and integration, making the image of God visible, tangible, and credible.

2. Sexuality as an Invitation

Sexuality is an inherent and inbuilt feature of human beings. Every fibre of human being is sexual and relational. Sexuality sends constant signals of invitation. It has a natural inclination, an inclination to be related and united. It attracts. Depending on the texture and temperaments of persons, sexuality of a person attracts, appreciates, and accepts other persons. Fundamentally, sexuality is an invitation to bonding and to stay in bond. It is an invitation to enter into relationship. It helps foster relationships. It is an invitation to cultivate a culture of love. It is an invitation to cultivate a culture of life. It is an invitation to cultivate a culture of care.

A close observation of the creation account discloses the truth of sexuality. According to the Priestly tradition, "God created humankind in

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his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27). In analysing this key verse, we find that the image of God resembles maleness and femaleness. In other words, human sexuality resembles the image of God. If so, in what does sexuality resemble the image of God? In order to identify the similitude, it is enough to trace the prominent images of God found in the Bible. The images of God that emerge in the Bible are basically one of love, life, and care. God is love. God is life. God is caring. In all these respects sexuality resembles the image of God: sexuality flowers in love; sexuality finds its fruition in life; and sexuality finds its fulfilment in caring.

2.1. Celebration of Love

Sexuality resembles the image of God, which is love. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son (John 3:16). God who is love created everything out of love and for love. So too sexuality is fashioned out of love and for love. God's invisible love is made visible in and through the love of human beings. Love expresses itself in giving more than in receiving. This is truly and clearly manifested in the love of Jesus for the world and humanity. His death on the cross is a true witness to the genuine love. Wherever love is, there is God. If human beings are created in the image of God, which is true beyond doubt from the biblical account, they are called to love, i.e., to love eternally as God loves. On account of human sexuality, which resembles the image of God, human beings are ever more invited to celebrate love.

Celebration presupposes more than one. So too is the celebration of love. This is elucidated by the creation account, when the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner" (Genesis 2:18). Sexuality is to be understood as an invitation to be-there-for-one-another-for-ever. It is to share their love for each other. The celebration of love attains completion and culmination in their total and eternal commitment, which is revealed and radiated in the love of Jesus Christ for his bride, the Church (see Ephesians 5:22ff.). The celebration of love may commence with *eros*, continue with *philos* and culminate in *agape*. In an act of sexual love, all these stages of love are mingled together and make a single act of love. Undoubtedly, a genuine celebration love is to be verified in *agape*, even when *eros* and *philos* may be wanting.[1]

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[1] Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas est*, §3.

Human sexuality is an invitation to translate the new commandment of love in everyday life. The new commandment of love (John 13:33-34) presents a great challenge before human beings. In essence, the nuance of the commandment consists in loving others as the Lord loved us. Jesus Christ loved us through the sacrifice of his life on the cross. Celebration of love in reference to sexuality necessarily involves self-sacrifice. It is through the mutual unconditional commitment, which demands great sacrifice for the flourishing of all in the context, sexuality attains its flowering. The celebration of love requires the process of death, "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24). Human sexuality houses the drive and energy suited to the sacrificial love. Unless the sexual love is tested in fire and proved to be triumphant, it cannot be concluded as the true celebration of love. Sexuality, with its immense potentiality, is an invitation to experiment with the celebration of love by finding its fulfilment in free, faithful, and fruitful love.

In this manner, the celebration of human sexuality makes the love of God visible, tangible, and credible to the world. So, too, the celebration of love directs our attention to the image of God, that is, love. Invariably, every form of celebrating human sexuality should be revealing the image and mystery of the divine love.

2.2. Celebration of Life

As human sexuality is an invitation to celebrate love, it is also an invitation to celebrate life. In fact, celebration of love presupposes, proposes, and promises life. Sexuality is essentially linked with the principle of life. Obviously, human procreation is possible on account of human sexuality. Moreover, sexuality is oriented towards life. This does not mean that every event of sexual love is to be resulted in life. Instead, it is open to the principle of life. This is the teaching of the Church: "Indeed, by its intimate structure, the conjugal act, while most closely uniting husband and wife, capacitates them for the generation of new lives, according to laws inscribed in the very being of man and of woman."[2]

Human sexuality is oriented to life. Through sexual act woman and man cooperate in the creative act of God by begetting new life. In this sense, couples engage in the creation of God, and in making the image of God visible. They not only represent the image of God, but also give birth to the image of God on earth. Truly, couples, through their God-given gift of sexuality and its potentiality, continue the work of creation – the creation of life. While couples celebrate their love, they engage in celebrating their life as well. Couples not only give birth to new life, but they support and promote their own lives. Being companions, friends, partners, etc., at the same time, couples encourage and enrich the life of each other in marital love.

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[2] Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, §12.

God is the source of life. He is the Creator and Lord of all. Needless to say, God is the author of human sexuality. Moreover, according to the biblical account, it is God who created human beings male and female, the determining and differentiating characteristics of sexuality. Soon after the creation of human beings, God blessed them saying, "Be fruitful and multiply!" (Genesis 1:28). This blessing further emphasizes the precept of God and the principle of life. Understood in the light of creation, it is appropriate to say that sexuality is naturally directed to and divinely blessed towards the beauty of life. According to the divine prerogative and the human happiness, human sexuality is intended to protect, preserve and promote human life on earth.

Sexuality is an invitation to celebrate life. This is one of the focal points attached to sexuality and this is what is being disputed and denied by contemporary free sex campaign. Sexual liberalization has brought about a revolution and promoted its exploitation. It promotes the sale of sexuality as a commodity, devoid of subjectivity and sanctity. Though the celebration of sexuality is given its due recognition in our times, it is being dissociated from the inherently interrelated celebration of life. Pleasure without procreation – seems to be the governing slogan of our times. So many devices are being developed and distributed to disrupt or deprive the flow of life – the celebration of life. The market-driven world promotes pleasure involved in the celebration of sexuality, but prevents procreation. The lucrative multinational companies are good at selling the recreational aspect of sexuality very often to the exclusion of the procreative. All contraceptives, both of temporary and permanent nature, oppose the celebration of life – the fruition of the flowering of love. Hence, one of the challenges that sexuality faces is its reluctance to take it to its reasonable end, that is, celebration of life. People celebrating love forget the principle of life, which apparently enables them to engage, embrace, and enjoy the love of the partners.

Indeed, sexuality has an inherent invitation to celebrate life. Unfortunately, due to devastating designs, human beings prevent the celebration of life and promote the culture of death, detrimental to human race itself. Jesus came to give us life: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). The context of the teaching highlights the point in question. It was in the context of the Parable of the Good Shepherd, in which Jesus revealed the purpose of his coming. Good Shepherd is one who knows, loves, and lays down his life for his sheep. In order to promote the cause of life, it is important to know, love, and live for the one with whom he celebrates his life. Therefore, prolife movement prefers to walk the true way of life (see John 14:6) and is ready "to wash the feet" (see John 13:14) of all, including the feet of the not yet born but will be born soon into the world. All reasonable people would agree on the significance of life, the fundamental good, for any kind of celebration. If the celebration of sexuality does not culminate in the celebration of life, which is inherently and intimately inbuilt into it, the future of humanity will be in jeopardy. Hence, sexuality is an invitation to celebrate life and promote the culture of life.

2.3. Celebration of Care

Sexuality is an invitation to celebrate caring. Just as sexuality extends an invitation to the celebration of love and life, so is also to care. This is a reflection of the image of God. The biblical image of God is necessarily the image of one who cares and accompanies his people. He takes care of the people as his own cherished possession. He leads them to the green pastures and cool waters. The Lord protects the people as a hen keeps chicks under its wings.

Sexuality has an inherent tendency to tender the partner and the children. This tendency is found among the animals as well. Comparatively, human younglings require longer care than the younglings of animal world. This is also an indication of the principle of parenting associated with sexuality. To be a mother or father is instinctual to human persons. It is in the parenthood, people find their maturity and fullness.

Children are blessings of the Lord. To take care of the children is a responsibility of parents. Caring and educating the children have been part of the teaching of the Church. It is not enough to give birth to children, but it is the responsibility of parents to bring them up and give proper education. The Church insists on responsible parenthood, "Marriage and conjugal love are by their nature ordained toward the begetting and educating of children. Children are really the supreme gift of marriage and contribute very substantially to the welfare of their parents."[3] The Church has been consistently teaching on the importance of caring along with other values of sexuality: "According to the plan of God, marriage is the foundation of the wider community of the family, since the very institution of marriage and conjugal love are ordained to the procreation and education of children, in whom they find their crowning"[4] It is for the parents to regulate the spacing and the number of children. They should go for the number of children, parents can responsibly care for and educate.

One of the growing evil tendencies found among the couples is female foeticide and female infanticide. It is an abominable crime to have the gender detection of the foetus in order to discriminate and destroy it in the mother's womb itself. This menace causes a great concern since there is already an imbalanced female-male ratio. It is not too late for the couples to see the image of God in their children regardless of their gender and bring them up as the fruit of their love and life.

The caring aspect of couples is so innate that even if they cannot beget children out of their wedlock, they go for adopting children who are orphans and less fortunate. This need for rearing children is reported to have been found among the so-called homosexuals as well.

Sexuality invites women and men to celebrate caring and parenting after the image of God, who takes good care and provides everything to his people according to their need. To be a parent is part of human sexuality. The Bible and the Church attach utmost importance to the parenthood of the couples; for, the future of humanity depends on right and proper parenting of their children, which facilitates the flourishing of their love and life.

3. Sexuality for Intimacy

Sexuality has an inherent invitation to be intimate with persons. It is for building up an intimacy in and through relationships. Sexuality offers an opening for relationship. By mere appearance, sexuality has an ability to attract and to be attracted by others. It has the power to appreciate the goodness in others. It has the strength to appropriate the beauty in others. In this sense, sexuality is inbuilt with immense possibilities to be in relation with persons. Sexuality requires from persons and enables them to engage in interactions and, thus, to grow in intimacy. Growth in intimacy is attained through interactions and relationships. Herbert Doms succeeded in highlighting the oft neglected aspect of sexuality. According to him, "In the perfect act, worthy of human beings, the two partners grasp each other reciprocally in intimate love; that is, spiritually they reciprocally give themselves in an act which contains the abandonment and enjoyment of the whole person and is not simply an isolated activity of organs."[5]

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[3] Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes*, §50.

[4] John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, §14.

The biblical story of creation gives insights into the depth and breadth of human intimacy:

> Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." ... So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken." Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed (Genesis 2:18-25).

According to the divine design, human beings are created for each other in order to overcome loneliness and to be there for the other. The whole narration on the creation of woman depicts intimacy that is inbuilt and innate. It seems that the process of creation is culminated with the creation of woman. In this sense, woman is the crown of man, who is addressed as the crown of creation. The expression of approval and appreciation, "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" is indicative of the intimate relationship between woman and man. Furthermore, the text provides prospective features of human sexuality, namely, "a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh." According to the biblical revelation, the intention of the Creator concerning sexuality is one-flesh-union, which speaks volumes on interrelatedness and intimacy.

3.1. Celebration of Oneness

Intimacy leads to oneness. Call to intimacy is part of sexuality. Indeed, sexuality is an invitation to be one: "the immediate purpose of the sexual act was the representation and realisation by husband and wife of their state of two-in-oneship."[6] It is a call to be in union and communion. Human being has an existential openness, i.e., an openness to be one with the One and others. Since human beings are created in the image of God, it is natural for them to have the fundamental openness to God and to others. Moreover, since human sexuality resembles the image of God, it is fitting to be one and to celebrate oneness with God and with others.

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[5] Herbert Doms, *Vom Sinn und Zweck der Ehe*, cited in Shaji George Kochuthara, *The Concept of Sexual Pleasure in the Catholic Moral Tradition*, Roma: Editrice Pontifica Università Gregoriana, 2007, 249.

One-flesh-union is the key to human sexuality. This is outlined at the very outset of creation. In connection with the debate on divorce, Jesus revealed and reiterated the truth, goodness, and beauty of one-flesh-union of husband and wife: "God made them male and female. 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate" (Mark 10:6-9). As it is evident from the teaching of Jesus, there is an absolute prohibition on divorce. This reality and mystery is celebrated in the liturgy of the holy matrimony. At the time of the matrimonial pledge, bride and bridegroom proclaim: "We pledge by this Gospel to live in love and fidelity and with oneness of mind in joy and sorrow, in wealth and want, in health and sickness, from this day till the hour of our death. May the almighty God help us to live in accord with this promise!"[7]

The practice of monogamy in the Church is to be understood from this intimate one-flesh-union. It is a corollary of the nature of human sexuality. It is the physical impossibility to share with others what is already fused into one.

To have an exclusive relationship with the partner, both in body and mind, is one of the fundamental features of human sexuality. Living with the partner forever is further facilitated by the giftedness of sexuality. Against this background, the teaching of the Church on sexuality can be evaluated and appreciated. The Church teaches categorically that the context of sexual life is marriage and only marriage. Hence, sexual act outside marriage is concluded as immoral and unacceptable. Premarital and extramarital sexual relationships are considered as infidelity and insincerity. The teaching of Jesus highlights the sinfulness of such acts, including that of intention: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:27-28).

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[6] Doms, *Vom Sinn und Zweck der Ehe*, cited in Kochuthara, *The Concept of Sexual Pleasure*, 249.

[7] *The Sacraments of the Syro-Malabar Church*, Kakkanad: Syro-Malabar Bishop's Synod, 2005, 148.

The primordial observation of the Lord in the paradise, "It is not good that the man should be alone" (Genesis 2:18), is in perfect agreement with the theology of intimacy. Unity, therefore, is a property of sexuality, and so also a property of marriage. Undoubtedly, human sexuality contributes to the introduction, initiation, and implementation of the beauty of oneness, the oneness of female and male persons by facing each other.

3.2. Celebration of Permanence

Human sexuality moves towards intimacy, which, in turn, brings partners to be bonded and makes them one in body and mind. Consequently, sexuality helps the partners to be there for one another forever. This is the meaning of permanence of marriage. Dissolubility is a property of sexuality, and also of marriage. As far as earthly life of a person is concerned, sexuality and marriage exist till the end. This has been the consistent teaching of the Church regarding sexuality and marriage.

The mention about permanence of marriage, as a natural and mature decision of the partners, is made in the creation account as well. "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24). Permanence is a requirement for the flourishing of sexuality. It is the faithfulness of the partners in marriage that makes the path of permanent partnership solid and candid. In his teaching on the question of divorce, Jesus clearly and emphatically taught: "Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate" (Mark 10:9). Permanence of relationship emerging from the sexual and marital bond is not only a natural inclination, but it is also a divine injunction, for the command of the Lord is unequivocal.

The increasingly unstable marriage bonds and the consequent unhealthy familial and social life cause serious threats as far as the future of humanity is concerned and, hence, calls for urgent attention and action. Most ills of the society find their first appearance in the field of sexuality and, then, in the arena of married family life. In spite of the mounting external pressure for dissolubility which precisely goes against stability and honesty in the relationship between partners, the Church clearly, convincingly, and courageously exhorts on the permanence of marriage, which fosters human sexuality. It is likely that there are ups and downs in human relationships, especially in sexual relationship found in married life. It is these hardships, misunderstandings, and tensions which make the relationship deeper and unflinching. Tempests are bound to come; but those who endure them will be faithful, successful, and joyful.

3.3. Celebration of Wholeness

Sexuality extends an invitation to be and to become whole. This indicates the complementarity of human sexuality. On account of being a human person, which means one who faces others, human sexuality invites and initiates persons of opposite sex to encounter each other – to think together, to talk together, to walk together, to work together, to pray together, to live together, and to lay down one's life for the other. This is the process of becoming one and whole. It presupposes that a person is only a half and the better-half is out there. It is by identifying and dedicating oneself to the better-half, the possibility of becoming whole – fusing both the halves together in body, mind, and soul – is foreseeable and attainable. The posture of human mating – face-to-face – is typical of human sexuality and symbolic of the orientation to wholeness and fullness.

However primitive the creation story is, it has something to offer on the truth of wholeness, the direction to complementarity of human sexuality. "So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man" (Genesis 2:22). It is in the context of deep sleep – ecstasy – the other sex, the female is created. In addition, the story tells that the Lord made the woman from the rib of the man. So, God is the Creator of both woman and man: man was made out of the earth and woman out of the rib of the man. This tale depicts the complementarity of sexes. Human experience reiterates the attraction and orientation of woman and man in making wholeness through their lovemaking and life-giving relationships. The pilgrimage towards wholeness is through the sexual love of the partners; of course, it is incomplete till both the partners meet in the presence and according to the pleasure of the Lord.

4. Sexuality for Integration

Sexuality is an invitation to intimacy for integration. The goal of sexuality is personal integration. Personal integration is attainable through interaction, involving the process of life through death. The path of integration is the way of the cross. It is by dying unto oneself, like the grain of wheat, a person travels to integration. Integration is not possible in isolation or alienation, but in and through relation. Sexuality is basically relational and, therefore, builds up intimate relationship. This relational bond, emerging from human sexuality, demands a lot of sacrifice, if not death. Being mindful of the likes and dislikes of the sexual partner, one goes through the path of purification and sanctification. At this stage, there is high level of mutual understanding and total commitment for the welfare of husband and wife. Saint Paul draws a beautiful metaphor to explain the process of surrender and sanctification leading to integration: "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For, the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Saviour. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:21-25).

4.1. Celebration of a Sacrament

Sexuality is an invitation to integration through intimacy which is to be celebrated in the sacrament of marriage. Marriage is the context of sexuality. Sexual life outside marriage is immoral. Marriage is considered a secular reality as well as a sacred mystery. It has been found in all cultures and at all ages. Therefore, it is a social institution. It is through the institution of marriage that the society finds its extension and expansion. The quality of a society depends on the quality of marriage, forming a family.

In creating man and woman, God was giving shape to marriage, for it was God who intended them to be together and to cling to each other. In this sense, marriage is instituted by God. The explicit significance of the institution of marriage, as spelled out in the creation account, is twofold: to "be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28) and to "become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24). In other words, marriage is for partnership and procreation, mutual love and fruitful love, companionship and children, pleasure and parenthood. These are the two complementary fundamental dimensions of human sexuality and they are supported and promoted by the institution of marriage. Hence, the Church teaches that sexuality is to be exercised in the context of marriage, where sexual acts are open to the unitive and procreative aspects of sexuality. The fundamental meaning of sexuality, namely, lovemaking and life-giving principles, are safeguarded and strengthened by the institution of marriage.

Marriage instituted by God is elevated to the status of a sacrament by Christ. Sacrament is a mystery of salvation; it is a visible sign of an invisible grace. Saint Paul teaches that marriage is "a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church" (Ephesians 5:32). Marriage is a mystery of salvation insofar as it makes visible the love, life, care of God, which is otherwise invisible. The love and life of God are made tangible and credible through marriage, the context of sexuality, which resembles with the image of God as well. The reality of divine love and life is seen in the creation of human beings in God's own image. The mystery of divine love and life is further revealed through the mystery of Christ and Church, which is reflected in the marital relationship of husband and wife. That is, seeing the love, life, and care of husband and wife, the world comes in touch with the love, life, and care of God for the world and humanity. In the same chapter, the apostle tells: "For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, because we are members of his body. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh" (Ephesians 5:29-31). Jesus made this point clear in his discourse on divorce and wanted it to be according to the divine design. Hence, Jesus taught: "Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate" (Mark 10:9). It is in the light of the teaching of Jesus that the Church holds on to unity and indissolubility, the properties of marriage, through which the truth, goodness, and beauty of sexuality are held in high esteem. In this manner, integrity of sexuality and integration of personality are worked out.

4.2. Celebration of Sanctification

The celebration of sexuality, as stated earlier, is in the context of marriage. Since human sexuality resembles the image of God, the proper celebration of sexuality is a way to sanctity. A reasonable and responsible sexual life of the partners in marriage helps them grow in holiness. In other words, if the mutual love of the sexual partners in marriage is open to the love, life, and care of God, then it is possible to conclude that they are on their way to holiness. Furthermore, if the mutual love of the sexual partners in marriage reflects the love of Jesus Christ for the Church, then it is appropriate to conclude that the couples, in living their life of love and care for each other, indeed, progress in holiness.

Human beings made in the image of God, needless to say, have to be like God. In this vein of thought, the Fathers of the Church taught: "God became man so that man may be god." Everybody is called to holiness. All are invited to the perfection of the Father (Matthew 5:48). Each one should be an icon of the compassion of the Father (Luke 6:36), which is said to be the touchstone of holiness. Saint Paul teaches in clear terms: "For this is the will of God, your sanctification" (1 Thessalonians 4:3). Therefore, sanctification or holiness is the will of God for the spouses as well. The bold and solid teaching of Saint Paul on sexuality helps in understanding the way to holiness: "The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does" (1 Corinthians 7:3-4). In this case, the apostle indicates the importance of recognising, respecting, and responding to the sexual needs of each other in order to be on the path of holiness for the status of married life. Elsewhere in the same chapter, Saint Paul alludes to the holiness of couples through their marital life: "For the unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through her husband" (1 Corinthians 7:14).

The Vatican Council II teaches, through its Constitution on the Church, that everyone is called holiness.[8] In the light of this teaching, there is a reiteration of the original vision on holiness. Accordingly, it is not enough to be good, but to be holy is the goal of everyone in the world. Hence, to be holy, it is enough for persons to live in accordance with the divine vocation each one is given. In this case, sexual intimacy and sexual integration constitute the ordinary way to holiness for the couples. Every moment and event of marital life is the way for the couples to be holy. Saint Ephrem taught that the "marriage bond is pure, honourable, and holy."[9]

Sanctification of the spouses and the wearing the robe of glory constitute a major theme in the celebration of marriage in the Church.

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[8] *Lumen Gentium*, Chapter 5.

[9] Saint Ephrem, *Hymnen Contra Haereses*, 45:7-8, cited in Louis Edakalathur, *The Theology of Marriage in the East Syrian Tradition*, Rome: Mar Thoma Yogam, 1994, 49.

While the priest blesses the *manthrakodi* (nuptial garment) during the ceremony, the following prayer is being recited:

> O, merciful Lord, who adorns the human soul with the enduring mantle of grace, bless this *manthrakodi*. Help this bride and groom put You on through their mutual love and self-giving. O Lord, who clothed the holy Church, Your bride, in the mantle of glory, make this couple worthy to put on the robe of glory in heaven after a life of sanctity on earth.[10]

The text of the blessing vividly reiterates the belief of the Christians regarding sexuality and marriage. The bride and groom are said to be putting on Christ through their mutual love and self-giving. Marriage is presented as the way to sanctify their life on earth and to put on the robe of glory in heaven. It is through the fulfilment of marital responsibilities, the couple may be made holy.

4.4. Celebration of Salvation

Sexuality, lived as per the divine design, according to each one's vocation, is a means for salvation. Salvation means wholeness. It is attained through relation. Hence, relation is the key to salvation. It is through relationship, persons become intimate and integrated. Sexuality offers a wider horizon to establish deeper and higher relationship. Though sexuality begins with physical and bodily relationship, it travels all the way to the Trinitarian Godhead, for it resembles the image of God. In this sense, sexuality enables persons to have intimacy and integration with everyone and everything of the divine origin. Herbert Doms illustrates the saving and sanctifying aspect of sexuality in the context of marriage in terms of Eucharistic communion: "The physical union in marriage completed the moral participation in the life of the other just as physical union with Christ in the Eucharist completed the believer's moral union with Christ."[11]

Sexuality is to be understood and appreciated in reference to the mystery of Incarnation as well. The mystery of Incarnation revealed the goodness and beauty of human body in the act of salvation. Since Jesus took human body in order to reconcile and redeem the world, the importance of body in the work of salvation is further highlighted. The acts of Jesus – acts of body, mind, and soul in one – worked out salvation for humanity. Jesus was born of Mary. He established his relationship through his total personal acts. He manifested the love of God for the world through his personal commitment to the needs of the people. His presence was the loving presence of his Father in person. He served humanity through his words and works. He, out of his love, died on the cross for the salvation of all. Incarnation of Jesus reveals the intimacy and integration of body and spirit. This is also the way for human beings to act out the love of God and attain their salvation. "The primal symbol of sexual intercourse enacts the psycho-physical intimacy found between spouses as their participation in God's own activity in his self-giving, triune love."[12] Sexuality helps unearth the potentialities to love and to make the love of God manifest. Sexual love becomes intense and intimate in marriage and helps the partners achieve integrity and integration. Marital love enables them to love and live for each other, involving unconditional, self-giving, and sacrificial love, culminating in laying down one's life for the other partner. "A true Christian understanding of marital intercourse will see bodily sexuality, not as an instrument of love, but as two whole persons seeking to attain union through self-sacrificing love."[13] Jesus worked out salvation through his self-sacrificing love. It is the self-sacrificing love of the couples, in marital family life, which paves the way for their salvation.

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[10] *The Sacraments of the Syro-Malabar Church*, 146.

[11] Doms, *Vom Sinn und Zweck der Ehe*, cited in Kochuthara, *The Concept of Sexual Pleasure*, 250.

The way to salvation was the way of the cross. Dying on the cross, of course, moved by love, Jesus set the path of salvation before the world. It means that salvation is costly. A high price is to be paid to experience it. The images of Good Shepherd (John 10:1-10) and the grain wheat (John 12:22-24) speak for Christ and his saving ministry. The blessing of the *tali*, during the mystery of the matrimony, unveils the rich significance of the cross for the bride and the groom:

> O Lord, You, by Your death on the cross, have earned the Church as Your bride, bless this *tali* that unites the bride and the groom in mutual trust and love. May this *tali*, the very symbol of unity, bind them to indivisible love and fullness of fidelity. May the cross, embossed on it, give them strength to bear cheerfully the sorrows of

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[12] Charles A. Gallagher, George A. Maloney, et al. *Embodied in Love - Sacramental Spirituality and Sexual Intimacy: A New Catholic Guide to Marriage*, New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1983, 12.

[13] Gallagher, et al., *Embodied in Love*, 12.

> life, and to lead a life pleasing to You. May this also be a symbol of their fidelity.[14]

Tali is the symbol of wedding and the symbol of salvation through Christ and his death on the cross. It is also a symbol of unity and fidelity. It reminds the bride and the groom about their mutual trust and love. *Tali* is meant for tying the knot of matrimony, a bond of salvation for the bride and the groom. Jesus brought about salvation for humanity through his obedience to be tied to the tree of the cross. Through the tying of the *tali* and following the path of the cross, the bride and the groom work out their salvation. Sexuality is an invitation to seek, stay, and surrender to the partner in love. Sexuality has the potentiality to bear the burden of and share the blessing with the marital partner. As Jesus surrendered himself for the wellbeing of the Church (Ephesians 5:22-33), husbands will submit themselves to the welfare of their wives. It is in giving they receive. It is in dying they live. This is the mystery of the cross, the sign of our salvation. The spouses bear witness to the mystery of the cross in their daily life. Through their faithful living, couples not only bear witness to the mystery of salvation, but also embrace it knowingly and willingly. Mysterious though it remains, real passion and compassion housed in the giftedness of sexuality facilitate and accelerate persons to follow in the way of the cross, the way to their salvation.

5. Conclusion

Christians understand sexuality as an invitation to intimacy and integration. Indeed, it is an invitation to reveal the image of God. Since sexuality resembles the image of God, it is an invitation to represent and realise the love, life, and care. Sexuality is an invitation to actualise oneness, permanence and wholeness in the context of marriage. In the context of marriage, sexuality assumes the status of a sacrament, the channel of sanctification, and the path of salvation for the couples. Pope Benedict XVI has described the truth, goodness and beauty of sexuality and marriage in Christianity as follows:

> First, *eros* is somehow rooted in man's very nature; Adam is a seeker, who "abandons his mother and father" in order to find woman; only together do the two represent complete humanity and become "one flesh." The second aspect is equally important. From

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[14] *The Sacraments of the Syro-Malabar Church*, 145. See also Paulachan Kochappilly, "The Covenantal Love and Life: Celebration of the Sacrament of Marriage," *Ephrem's Theological Journal* 7 (October 2003), 171-193.

> the standpoint of creation, *eros* directs man towards marriage, to a bond which is unique and definitive; thus, and only thus, does it fulfil its deepest purpose. Corresponding to the image of a monotheistic God is monogamous marriage. Marriage based on exclusive and definitive love becomes the icon of the relationship between God and his people and vice versa. God's way of loving becomes the measure of human love. This close connection between *eros* and marriage in the Bible has practically no equivalent in extra-biblical literature.[15]

According to the Christian perspective, marriage is the only context of sexual life. It is simultaneously a secular reality, a sacred mystery, and a sacrament of sanctity and salvation. In the context of marriage, sexuality unfolds and upholds the essential and inseparable aspects of lovemaking (Genesis 2) and life-giving (Genesis 2), unitive (Genesis 2) and procreative (Genesis 1), fidelity (Genesis 2) and fertility (Genesis 1), vertical (Genesis 1) and horizontal (Genesis 2), intergenerational (Genesis 1) and interpersonal (Genesis 2).

In the light of the above reflection, sexuality is an invitation to the celebration of love and life.[16] It is in the context of faithful, free, and fruitful love and life, the door of celebration is open for the bride and the groom to enter into bridal chamber to sing the song of love and to commence the dance of life with the Lord of celebration. Sexuality enables and enhances human relationality. The key to celebration is relation. While relation is the foundation of celebration, celebration cements relation. It is through the right and fitting celebration of sexuality, woman and man, created in the image and likeness of God, live the life of intimacy and integration.

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[15] Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas est*, §11.

[16] Kochappilly, "The Covenantal Love and Life," 171-193.

Journal of Dharma 34, 1 (January-March 2009), 37-68

SPIRITUALITY OF SEX

Kurian Perumpallikunnel[♦]

1. Introduction

In religious or spiritual circles and also outside of them, human beings basically tend to have one of two fundamental views or value judgments with regard to the ultimate nature of sexuality. One of these views holds that sexuality is good, healthy, and natural. This is obviously a very popular belief in the time that we live in and is often fuelled by a certain rebellion against the repressive ideas and traditions of the past. The other view, which many traditional religions seem to emphasize, is that sexuality is dirty and evil, something to be ashamed of and eschewed by serious spiritual contenders. This might have prompted Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) to state that "Christianity gave *Eros* poison to drink: he did not die of it but degenerated – into vice."[1] Benedict XVI, the present Pope, his countryman, might have felt that it was his obligation to give a fitting reply to the above mentioned vicious attack on the Church and its morality. In *Deus Caritas Est*, his first Encyclical Letter, he took up the issue, and engaged in a scholarly exposition. He inquires:

> According to Friedrich Nietzsche, Christianity had poisoned *eros*, which for its part, while not completely succumbing, gradually degenerated into vice. Here the German philosopher was expressing a widely-held perception: doesn't the Church, with all her commandments and prohibitions, turn to bitterness the most precious thing in life? Doesn't she blow the whistle just when the joy which is the Creator's gift offers us a happiness which is itself a certain foretaste of the Divine?[2]

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[1] Friedrich Nietzsche, http://thinkexist.com/quotation/christianity_gave_eros_poison_to_drink-he_did_not/. Nietzsche praised Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk and the mastermind behind the Protestant revolution, who married an ex-nun, for rebelling against Catholic tradition of priestly celibacy. "... perhaps Luther's greatest merit was to have had the courage of his sensuality" (Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy & The Genealogy of Morals*, New York: Doubleday, 1956, 232).

[2] Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* (Encyclical Letter, 2005), at www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi, §3.

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Kama means a 'desire'/'passion'/'craving' for pleasure, a craving for all things pleasurable, in particular sexual and sensual. It is also the name of the Indian God who represents the sexual nature in human beings, much like *Eros* did to the Greeks. Even though 'sex' was/is/will always be the most popular and attractive subject, flooding the internet and bookshops with books on Tantrism[3] is comparatively a recent phenomenon. There were westerners like Sir John Woodruff (a.k.a. Arthur Avalon) who defended Tantras as the "ancient heart" of the Vedas and decried the blindness of those who reject all eroticism in the service of religion. In contrast, Swami Vivekananda has clearly bowdlerized his own guru's teaching to promote a kind Hinduism remarkable for its likeness to the missionary Christianity.[4] 'Sex', along with its dangers and possibilities, posed issues and concerns not merely for Christianity and Hinduism alone. All religions, civilisations, and societies had to and still face this most fundamental reality of human existence. There were diametrically opposite views regarding the benefits and risks involved in promoting and developing an allegiance to *Eros*. Is sex an indispensable part of the spiritual path towards enlightenment and Self- or God-realization or is it an empty promise that distracts us from realizing our full human potential? Is the sexual force in itself good, bad, dirty, or evil? This essay is an attempt to elucidate human beings' love-hate relationship with *Eros*, by specifically dealing with a successful offshoot that emerged from it in the field of spirituality, namely, bridal or spousal mysticism, which is to serve as a convincing response to the accusation against Catholic Church that it recoils from sexuality.

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[3] Tantrism is a complex body of religious practices that spread throughout the Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions; it is a form of spirituality that seemingly combines sexuality, sensual pleasure, and the full range of physical experience with religious life. Tantra has held a central yet conflicting role within the western imagination ever since the 'discovery' of Indian religions by European scholars. Always radical, always extremely Other, Tantra has proven a key factor in the imagining of India.

[4] Hugh B. Urban, *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power in the Study of Religion*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003, 153-154. Vivekananda's agenda to "unsex" the Hindu pantheon is still being carried out, not only by the Ramakrishna Mission but also by a variety of far right religious parties in India. Meanwhile Indian gurus, like Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (later known as Osho), who travelled to America and imported his own brand of 'neo-Tantrism', marketed Tantrism to the late-twentieth-century American consumer culture.

2. *Kāmasūtra*: An Ascent from Animal-Sex to Human-Sex

Sex is customary to the higher grade living organisms. Normally, its operation is governed by natural instincts. The Mother Nature's purpose of sex is nothing but to ensure the survival of species. Spurred by this most basic instinct, the male and the female collaborate to realize self-preservation. However, in the case of human beings their natural sex could be elevated to a supernatural realm. Self-preservation is not the sole purpose of human sexuality. It is true that human beings have very strong sexual instinct. We often hear of cases in which individuals succumb to this basic instinct and find powerless to be in control. Many even profess that it is impossible and abnormal for human beings to contain and bridle this basic source of potent power. However, it is our experience that those two exceptional human faculties, namely, self-awareness and freedom of choice, are powerful enough to facilitate and enable human beings to contain and restrain the free reign of the animal instinct that they have inherited and elevate sex to human or even divine realms!

Self-awareness, self-control, and the ability to make free choices are capable of enabling human beings to elevate their sex-life to a higher level far beyond the one that of the animal world. Human sex can serve certain purposes that far exceed mere procreation. It is a known fact that the enjoyment that human beings derive out of sexual acts surpasses that of all other living organisms. Among human beings companionship often supersedes the procreative purpose of the sexual relationship. However, all sexual acts that occur among human beings need not be always 'human-sex'. When it is entirely instinct-driven and not a 'will-driven human act', it denigrates itself to mere 'animal-sex'. *Kāmasūtra* of Vatsyayana[5] is a classic example of how the ancient Indians managed to transcend the animal-sex and began enjoying human-sex, a phenomenal elevation from profane sexuality to sacred sexuality. Vatsyayana elevated lovemaking into an art, which human beings alone are capable of. His erotic, exotic techniques, practices, and positions spark an immediate vision and response in the human mind and body. When one speaks of the *Kāmasūtra*, in modern culture, it is most often equated with sex and sex positions, though that is not all it is about. It is a call to elevate sex from animal level to human level. Following the footsteps of Vatsyayana, the later generations developed sex not just into an art but a consecrated path towards enlightenment.

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[5] Vatsyayana, through *Kāmasūtra*, elevated sexual intimacy into a wilful act with total self-awareness and self-control. *Kāma* means carnal desire and *Sūtra* means aphorism. The *Kāmasūtra* details many lovemaking techniques, the Sixty-Four Arts, courting practices, modes of touching including biting and scratching, sexual positions or *āsanas*, ways of treating marriage partners as well as consorts, the concocting of aphrodisiacs, etc. Vatsyayana has given the art of lovemaking a dual responsibility and has accorded both the sexes equal level of satisfaction.

3. Tantra Yoga and the Sacred Sex

When sex was eschewed by many religions, considering it impure and incompatible with the pursuit of spiritual life, there emerged *Tantra* with a diametrically opposite view. Tantra yoga has a different and more radical opinion on sex. Recently, numerous well-researched articles and books are published that provide us a refined understanding of the political, religious, and cultural dialectics and dynamics of India that produced Tantra yoga. It is generally accepted that Tantrism as a generic category designating a self-consciously constructed religious tradition did not exist before the colonial encounter. Like Hinduism, Tantrism too came into being as a category in the dialectical encounter between the exotic Orient and the humdrum Occident.[6] Tantric yoga often served as a shifting amalgam of fantasies, fears, and wish-fulfilment of the West.[7] It is quite clear that in the Indian and the Western imagination of the early nineteenth century Tantric yoga had connotations of secret occult power, while by the mid- to late twentieth century the terms are widely equated with sexuality, openness, and liberation.[8] Tantra takes the approach that one should not reject the body and its desires, but actually embrace them on the road to enlightenment. It promotes the view that sexual intercourse can be a sacrament and a means of spiritual transformation.

Tantra Yoga considers *Kāma* (desire) as the prime motivating force of the universe; so, it does not ask it's aspirants to renounce desire. Many other spiritual sciences advise the avoidance of desire, which they claim leads to bondage and is an obstacle to achieving higher consciousness. They try to overcome desire through asceticism. Yet, one is left with the paradox that to achieve desirelessness, one must have a strong desire to be without desire. Tantra Yoga asserts that desires are natural and that as long as we are embodied, we will have them. Our sense organs serve as windows through which the objects of our desires enter. The constant presence of desire arouses a yearning and love for the desired object. Most desires centre on the physical body and its comforts. People become slaves to their instincts, which constitute the lower part of the personality and fall prey to agitation, loneliness, anxiety, dissatisfaction, selfishness, and misery. Tantra Yoga offers practical tools for reprogramming the mind and our desires. By means of physical and ritual cleaning, breathing exercises (*pranayama*), contemplation, visualization (of *yantras* and deities), repetition of a mantra (*mantra pooja*), Tantra Yoga helps to unfold our divine nature. After all, it is in the act of procreation that human beings conspicuously participate in the most potent creative energy of the Divine!

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[6] Urban, *Tantra*, 27.
[7] Urban, *Tantra*, 3.
[8] Urban, *Tantra*, 27.

Tantra yoga suggests that sexuality can be a very powerful force that can be harnessed for increased self-awareness. Thus, tantra yoga is unusual, in that it not only allows sexual feelings and contact, but uses sexual experience as a means to enlightenment. The Tantra yogis, like modern psychologists, maintain that there is an enormous energy locked into sexuality, which, if released from the lower end of the spine, can flow up the spinal column to bring divine illumination in the brain. They believe that within the interior of the spine, in a hollow region called the *canalis centralis*, there is an energy conduit called *suṣumna*. Along this conduit, from the base of the *perineum* to the top of the head, flows the most powerful of all psychic energies, *Kuṇdalini* energy. On the other side of the canal are two additional energy channels, one called *Idá*, corresponding to the male, and the other the *Pingala*, corresponding to the female. *Ida* is at the right of the base of the spine and the *pingala* begins at the left. These two psychic currents are said to coil upward around the spine and the *suṣumna*, like snakes crossing the *chakras* (energy wheel of centre of conscious). *Kuṇdalini* yogi's lifelong task is to evolve through various *chakra* qualities and challenges, thereby bringing the focus of the *Kuṇdalini* energy upward from the base of the spine to the top of the head. Once the yogi has achieved mastery of self by relaxing body tension, silencing mental chatter, and releasing energy blocks, one is ready to join with a partner whose energies and spirit complement one's own in such a way that together they form a 'whole'. The partners must first achieve a highly developed awareness within their being, a process that might take a lifetime, before being ready to engage in a tantric embrace.

In the tantric lovemaking experience, known as *maithuna*, the lovers undergo a variety of meditations and rituals before they actually make physical contact. They maintain the spiritual link or bond throughout the lovemaking process. They visualize the flow of *prāṇic* currents between them. In Tantric Yoga, the lovers do not try to achieve orgasm. In fact, they work hard to prolong it as orgasm is not their final goal. They attempt to reach that stage of total absorption or union where mind is quietened, a state far beyond the coveted 'rapture'[9] or the ecstasy or mere corporeal orgasm. They attempt to draw the forces of *Kuṇḍalini* energy upward through their body-minds, thus, releasing the power of various *chakras*. This force transforms the yogi psychologically, changing his/her personality as the *Kuṇḍalini* rises to each succeeding *chakra*. The emphasis is not on the sexual release as an end in and of itself, but on sex as a channel through which the evolution of self may proceed. The goal of Tantra is the union of dynamic and static aspects of personality. It is quite different from practices that dwell on renunciation and desirelessness.

Modern Tantrism is a blend of ancient Tantric rituals, the *Kāmasūtra* teachings, modern psychology, and eastern philosophy. Using a variety of tools, supreme among them sexuality, the Tantric masters considered the ultimate goal to be dissolving of the ego and complete union with the divine energy that is within all human beings. They claim that practising the art of sexual ecstasy and having entered the divine realms of ego dissolution over and over allows for the veils and boundaries of separation to fall at our feet. We open again and again, each time allowing more in -- friends, lovers, family, orgasms, nature, abundance, light, dark, and spirit. Nothing seems separate anymore, including our selves. At times, we even experience our own divinity – our own true nature. That is when transformation and transcendence occur. However, it is quite evident that most westerners have a very shallow view of Tantric Yoga – they only see the sexual side of it. Tantra yogis, however, claim that their practice is a very deep and esoteric discipline which channels the creative energies in the direction of permanent enlightenment.

4. Islamic View of Sex

Islam teaches that Allah created two different and distinct genders as a pair (Qur'an 75:39, 53:45, 92:3). The male is different from the female (Qur'an 3:36) although ultimately both are from the same source (Qur'an 4:1, 7:189, 16:72, 30:12, 39:6). Each gender is encouraged to maintain its biological, psychological, emotional, and social identity. This is for the purpose of facilitating and regulating relations between the two genders for the good of the whole society. Islam forbids complete rejection and suppression of the sexual instinct. Islam insists that celibacy and monasticism practised among Christians and other religions are human inventions (Qur'an 57:27) which go against basic human nature.[10]

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[9] Also known as 'break-through', an inexplicable experience which mystics fail to categorize whether it is pain or pleasure, probably beyond both.

Fatima Mernissi, a Moroccan feminist and sociologist, speaks of two theories of sexual dynamics that govern the Muslim society: one 'explicit' and the other 'implicit'. The 'explicit' theory holds that men are aggressive in their interaction with women, and women are passive. This theory casts the man as the hunter and the woman as his prey. This vision is widely shared and deeply ingrained in both men's and women's vision of themselves. According to Mernissi, the 'implicit' theory contradicts the above said theory of female sexuality based on an interpretation of the Qur'an and commands a profound impact on the Muslim unconsciousness. This conception of female sexuality casts the woman as the hunter and the man as the passive victim. While both theories acknowledge women's irresistible power to deceive and defeat men, not by force but by cunning and intrigue, in the implicit theory, this power of the female, associated in particular with her active sexuality, is seen as an element that is the most destructive to Muslim social order in which the feminine is regarded as synonymous with the satanic.[11] Man has no choice: he can only give in to her attraction. Therefore, she is identified with *fitna* (chaos) and with the anti-divine and anti-social forces of the universe.[12]

5. Pro-Celibacy Trends among Indian Religions

Brahmacharya or celibacy does not necessarily have, in the Hindu society, any connection with the spiritual life, *sādhana* (spiritual practice), or self-realization. In ancient India, a person's life was divided into four stages. The first stage was the student stage, or *brahmacharya*, where young people were expected to prepare themselves for their adult lives to come. During this stage, they were expected to observe strict celibacy. The second and third stages were *Grihasta* (householder's stage) and *Vanaprasta* (Forest retreat stage). The fourth stage was *Sannyāsa*. Once a person becomes a *sannyāsin*, or a monk, then celibacy was automatic. Thus, concept of *brahmacharya* or celibacy was part and parcel of the Indian-Hindu social tradition. Buddha taught that as long as one is engaged in sexual activity, s/he will not be interested in practising spiritual life. When he gave his gradual enlightenment teaching, he said that lust which is after pleasure will gradually lead to fear, greed, jealousy, anger, hatred, confusion, and fighting. All these negative things arise from lust.

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[10] Omar Hassan Kasule Sr., *Human Sexuality and the Shariat*, www.zawaj.com/articles/sexuality_kasule.html

[11] Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*, Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987, 32-33.

[12] Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, 41.

Sexuality has its own rhythm. It is a part of human experience, the part that relentlessly and with all its tricks and sweet temptations, which always demands procreation. It is up to the individuals to respond to it or not. Not responding to it means that nothing happens. Renouncing that part can strengthen one's conviction that it is possible to be free in this life from the blind forces of nature. Celibacy is a precious opportunity for individuals to discover and investigate true independence, un-distracted and with great devotion. The more one lets go of his/her romantic helplessness and angry blaming, the more s/he would see wo/men as the human beings they are. They are no longer the prey that a wo/man has to trap in order to fill the vacuum within and, thus, to survive. Here, a new attitude and vision emerges in one's approach towards the other sex. It is possible to trust them, to be a human being among human beings; no more a hunter after the prey.

Sexuality is best understood as the basic force of attraction between women and men, a force of human growth that needs to be cultivated, but in the right way, with discipline and with choices that are mature, so that it does not become a source of neurosis. However, as soon as we say that there is something wrong with sexuality, then we side with those who do not believe that everything that God has made is good. What we do with sex may not be good, but that could never mean that the sexual force itself is not absolutely essential. That force is not to be repressed but transmuted, transformed, and integrated into the whole of our being; then, we have a whole human being. Sexuality is a positive power, and it is a hazard in celibacy only if one denies it and then represses one's feelings instead of integrating them into the evolving development of one's faculties, including one's intuitive and spiritual faculties, which are fostered by a celibate commitment. Practice of celibacy should not result out of coercion. Teachings, which say that one has to be a celibate if she/he wants to be on the path of spiritual awakening, are mistaken. If sexuality just falls away from us in total contentment and in a total 'yes' from our inner being, then abstinence or celibacy is a virtue. But if not, if it is a forced thing as an external authority or religious teaching insists that this is the right way, we would never get rid of sexuality.

There is a great advantage to celibacy because one can remove oneself from the preoccupation with all the mundane things that have to do with sex and that tend to keep one attached, needy, jealous, and so on. If we, once and for all, do not bother with it and remove ourselves from it, we probably have a better chance to focus our energies on spiritual matters. That is a great possibility, but it has to happen at the right time, with maturity.

6. Origins of Bridal Mysticism

Bridal mysticism was at times accused of emotionalism, experience mania, sensationalism, and irrationality. Religious leadership often watched bridal mystics with suspicion and time and again violently suppressed their trend as unorthodox and subversive. Probably, the early forms of the Occidental bridal mysticism were influenced by the myth of Eros and Psyche, which was quite popular during late Hellenism. Indeed, we find a Gnostic interpretation of this myth in the anonymous homily entitled *Exegesis on the Soul*,[13] which describes the sacrament of the Bridal Chamber. During the Renaissance, Greek themes and images were rediscovered in Italy and elsewhere in Europe. Certainly, the form of Teresa's vision, and the symbolism illustrated by Bernini, lies very close to the tale of the god of love and his human beloved. Psyche's name means 'soul' and she begins her career as a mortal. It is because Eros loves her and wants her for his bride, that Zeus is willing to elevate her to the status of an immortal. For Teresa, the moment in which she experiences the spiritual wound is but one moment in a complex drama culminating in the spiritual marriage, when such wounds will no longer be felt but are supplanted by a complete interior union of God and the soul. The two traditions that are joined in this image of Saint Teresa are that of Greek mythology story of Psyche and Eros and Renaissance Christian mysticism, in which the soul is awakened to spiritual passion. There is, however, one important variation: In the Greek tale (recounted by Apuleius) it is not Eros who wounds Psyche with one of his arrows (in fact, he wounds himself when he first beholds her); rather, Psyche accidentally wounds herself when, disobeying him, she takes up a light to see what he looks like. In Teresa's vision, she, as 'soul', is completely passive and receives the wound at the hands of an Eros figure. Nevertheless, central to both scenes is the symbol of wounding, the origin of love in pain inflicted from without.

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[13] *Exegesis on the Soul*, one of the Gnostic scripture recovered in the Nag Hammadi Library, explains in poetic style the human soul's alienated condition in the world, its step by step awakening, and the eventual recovery of its original wholeness and wisdom. It is a spiritual as well as a psychological process.

The marriage between the human soul and the divine lover represents a creative union of the human self with its transpersonal counterpart. The soul symbolizes the subjective capacity to feel and experience reality-capacity for consciousness. By uniting with the god of love, the soul gains a permanent connection with the abiding source of all life and love. In the infant, there is not yet the separation that gives rise to a subjective self. In the symbolism of the sacred marriage, a return to the original wholeness is achieved without a regression to the infantile unconsciousness.

According to many mystics, the desire for human love and the desire for spiritual fulfilment are intrinsically related. From a psychological point of view, they are two expressions of the same basic desire, i.e., to be united with one's beloved. Both the lover and the mystic seek complete fulfilment. Both can be inflamed with passion for their goal and be obsessed with the pursuit. The physical act of love reaches its zenith when two bodies and two minds are intimately united during sexual intercourse. All cares and concerns melt away as lovers awash in sensual pleasure, losing themselves in one another and melting into a state of blissful union. This experience of blissful melding is common to both sexual and spiritual fulfilment. Mystics, too, seek the experience of total union. The fusion they seek, however, is with God, not a lover, and the result is not an exquisite sensual experience but a complete absorption in God's fullness.

Such mystics consider themselves brides, accepting God as their spiritual husband. Although the lover and the mystic strive for oneness very differently, it is actually the same oneness they seek, according to some mystics. For them, there cannot be varieties of oneness. Oneness is the utter perfection remaining when everything that limits or isolates has been cast aside. Oneness is the experience of reality freed from all that obscures or distorts it in any way. Oneness is the fundamental reality, the truth of God. Mystics sometimes express themselves using passionate and poignant metaphors based on human love. Among these, the most striking is the mystic's symbolic espousal and marriage to God. Spiritual practices, employing such symbolism, constitute bridal mysticism.

In almost all religious traditions we come across with examples of bridal mysticism. Their scriptures often bear witness to the glory of the divine love or pure devotion through numerous hymns belonging to the genre of bridal mysticism.[14] They are revealed in this form of selfless love, steeped in the bliss of the divine experience by constantly remembering him. It is said that bridal mysticism (*mādhurya bhāva*) is the all-rounded, most intimate, highest ecstasy, and most exalted expression of pure transcendental love. Also, the bridal mysticism is considered to be inclusive of all the qualities of other *bhāva*s or *rasa*s, where all other *bhāva*s[15] attain their spiritual perfection. Bridal mysticism is characteristic of pure love or devotion (*bhakti*), not lust; for, love and lust are two totally different feelings. Bridal mysticism, in its essence, acts in a way that is pleasing to the divine will (eternal law). Other characteristics of pure devotion include abandoning of all desires and fear, keeping devotion unadulterated, being steadfast in devotion to the One Divine only, and keeping mind engaged in meditation and deep reflections.

A soul fallen in love with God leaves the worldly pleasures to the worldly people and longs for union with God as her groom in body and soul. The longing and seeking of the Lord as her bridegroom is the essence of bridal mysticism. The soul in the practice and experience of bridal mysticism goes through the harrowing experience of separation from him (*viśleṣam*) and the exhilarating experience of union (*samśleṣam*) with him. For enamoured souls, *viśleṣam* appears to be stretched into eternity while, in *samśleṣam*, the eternity is crowded into a moment. The soul suffers the worst from separation from her Lord. She may implore birds, flowers, the dark rain clouds, and bees to be her messengers to her Lord and to bring him to her quickly. She is reminded of her Lord in everything she sees around her. After these painful efforts that get her nowhere, she decides to put up with her sorrow and places her trust in the Lord's infinite mercy. The soul has to annihilate her ego (*ahaṁkāra*) to realize the fruits of bridal mysticism. Even the presence of a tiny bit of *ahaṁkāra* (divisive ego) leads to sorrow. Once that is banished in the intense pursuit of realizing the unitive life with the Lord, as her groom, the soul will face the sorrows undismayed and enjoy pleasures uncontaminated. Any bit of divisive ego has to be pulverised through total surrender to the Lord, the eternal bridegroom. The love of the soul for her Lord should be selfless – love of God for the sake of love and for nothing else, not even for the sake of salvation is the true mark of bridal mysticism. God is both the path and the goal of the journey on this earth – a path in which there is no self-losing and a goal to which his wisely guided steps are surely arriving at every moment. True love brings with it deep humility, an awareness of one's insignificance before all and helplessness before God. A love-stricken soul would not feel it as a humiliation at all when she goes out with her sufferings to pretty little things like flowers and bees and seeks consolation from them. It is this humility, born of love of God that helps her win the game of love. Spiritual union with the Lord in wedlock brings to the bride utter rapture, joy, and contentment. Due to the absence of selfishness the soul would prefer that all human souls should come to experience this marvellous divine union.

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[14] For example: "I am the bride; the Creator is my Husband, Lord. I adorn myself to His liking. When it pleases Him, He enjoys me. My body and mind are joined to the True Lord." *Sad Guru Grandha Sahib*, 1128.

[15] God could be approached through different mental states such as *Śānt Bhāva* (tranquillity), *Dās Bhāva* (master and a servant relationship), *Sakhā Bhāva* (friendship or comradeship), *Vātsalya Bhāva* (affection, like between mother and child), and *Mādhurya Bhāva* (bridal mysticism).

7. *Mādhurya Bhāva*: The Hindu Bridal Mysticism

Mirābaī, Āndāl, and Akkamahadevī are renowned models among Hindu bridal mystics. They considered their souls as the eternal brides, the Lord being their eternal Bridegroom. All the three excelled in the life of renunciation and divine realization. They lived in entirely different regions, wrote in their respective language in different age and milieu, but became legends in their lifetime itself, by the austere life and single purpose of pursuit of God and, finally, divine attainment. The Hindu tradition calls it *bhakti*, and describes it as the highest love for God, through which one attains immortality and fulfilment. To experience the bridal mysticism, all souls are considered as female in relation to the Supreme Being, who is considered the only man (*Puruṣottama*). Through devotional practices, mystics strive to develop passionate love for God that draws them towards ecstatic union. In these practices, they often use various types of human love as model or paradigm. In bridal mysticism, union between the soul and God is recognized as spiritual marriage. The great outpouring of the soul to realize the Lord as her husband is the essence of bridal mysticism. Just as engagement precedes marriage, spiritual espousal – the dedication of one's life to God – precedes spiritual marriage. Just as a marriage is consummated with sexual union, the mystic's marriage is consummated through ecstatic union with God. Mirābaī wrote of her spiritual espousal in beautiful verses:

Come to my pavilion, O my King!
I have spread a bed made of delicately selected buds and blossoms
and have arrayed myself in bridal dress from head to toe.[16]

In contemplation and prayer, the mystic prepares for intimate union, awaiting God's sacred touch like a woman awaiting the caress of her lover. But God's presence cannot be commanded; divine union is not a matter of choice. Instead, the mystic must wait patiently, passively, in a state of utter surrender. God's presence comes when one is receptive, figuratively naked, being stripped of all pretence and pride.

In the Hindu tradition of *Gaudiya Vaiṣṇavism*,[17] every person is considered female in relation to God, the only masculine being in existence. All are weak and helpless compared to God's power and majesty. All are entirely dependent on God for each breath and moment of life. In the consummation of spiritual marriage, God is the assertive partner, penetrating the devotee with divine love and filling her with the ravishing joy of blissful union. Therefore, regardless of being male or female, mystics assume the woman's role in spiritual marriage. They become brides, and God alone is the bridegroom. God is like the powerful, desirable lover who comes to seduce and possess his beloved. In prayerful contemplation, the mystic anxiously awaits God's arrival, remaining passive and receptive.

For male mystics, to take a feminine role is particularly radical – they must set aside their essential maleness for the sake of spiritual growth. Some male practitioners of bridal mysticism strive to cultivate feminine qualities to strengthen the spiritual marriage. The presence of feminine qualities in all men is well-known. The famous psychologist Carl Jung said that all men possess an *anima*, a feminine nature or soul that exists in addition to their male personas.[18] Whereas most men ignore or suppress the *anima*, some mystics actively nurture it as a spiritual practice. As their feminine qualities become highly developed, their intimacy with God as His spiritual bride deepens. The great South Indian saint, Nammālvār, is an example of a mystic who cultivated a feminine self-image for this purpose. He wrote passionate devotional poetry in which he expressed himself as a love-sick woman longing for her beloved Lord Kṛṣṇa:

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[16] Mirabai, *The Devotional Poems of Mirabai*, trans. A. J. Alston, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1980, 96.

[17] Gaudiya Vaishnavism was promoted by Sri Krishna Chaitanya in the 16th century CE. This tradition in many ways is unique amidst the various *bhakti*-traditions, both ancient and modern, of India. Aside its profound philosophical treatises, it is well known for its developed aesthetic insights into the dynamics of the eternal loving sports of God. www.gaudiyadiscussions.com/articles/ (David C. Scott, "Radha in the Erotic Play of the Universe").

[18] Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), a Swiss psychiatrist, was the founder of Analytical Psychology. His approach to human psychology emphasized understanding the psyche through exploring the world of dreams, art, mythology,

> I desired to see and lo!
> I lost my fine complexion,
> My bracelets slipped off my emaciated arms,
> My breasts became pale and I became jaded.[19]

There is probably no better example of gender reversal in bridal mysticism than the famous nineteenth-century Indian saint, Sri Ramakrishna. He was very much inspired by stories about the *gopis*, the shepherd girls, who were irresistibly attracted to Lord Kṛṣṇa. Sri Ramakrishna idealized the *gopis* and yearned to be reborn as a woman so that he could love Kṛṣṇa as they did.[20] To deepen his feminine qualities, as part of his spiritual practice, Sri Ramakrishna sometimes wore a silken *sari* and jewellery. He often performed ritual worship while dressed in women's clothes. His behaviour became so feminine that women began to consider him as one of their own gender.[21] He became totally identified with Rādhā, the *gopi* who had Lord Kṛṣṇa's special attention. In prayerful contemplation, Sri Ramakrishna would weep bitterly, longing for his divine spouse to come and immerse him in blissful ecstasy. According to Sri Ramakrishna, a special faculty for perceiving God can be acquired through devotional practices. Referring to a sacred form of sexuality, he said:

> God cannot be seen with these physical eyes. In the course of spiritual discipline one gets a 'love body' endowed with 'love eyes', 'love ears', and so on. One sees God with those 'love eyes'. One

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world religion, and philosophy. He was a strong believer in the importance of integration of opposites (e.g., masculine and feminine, thinking and feeling, science and spirituality). Jung proposed the presence of anima and animus in every person and identified the anima as being the unconscious feminine component of men and the animus as the unconscious masculine component in women. See Carl Jung, *The Psychology of the Unconscious*, Tel-Aviv: Dvir Co. Ltd., 1973 (originally 1917).

[19] Nammalvar, *Tiruvaymoli*, VIII.2.1, trans. S. Satyamurthi Ayyangar, Bombay: Ananthacharya Indological Research Institute, 1981, 738.

[20] Swami Nikhilananda, *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, New York: Ramakrishna-Vedanta Center, 1984, 6.

[21] Nikhilananda, *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, 24-25.

> hears the voice of God with those 'love ears'. One even gets a sexual organ made of love. With this 'love body' the soul communes with God.[22]

It could be said that Sri Ramakrishna took the practice of bridal mysticism to an extreme. However, by examining such extremes, we can gain important insights. When we understand how and why mystics incorporate sexuality into their spiritual practice, we cannot help but see its purely sacred nature. The lives and teachings of such mystics offer us a rare and precious perspective. By seeing through their eyes, our own vision is widened. Sexuality is sacred when it takes us towards God. With a human lover, sexuality can provide a glimpse of God's limitless fullness. Turned towards God, sexuality can lead to the most intimate and transforming relationship possible, culminating in total absorption in God's fullness. Sexuality is a glorious part of God's creation. It is a wonderful and precious facet of life. It is, after all, a gift from God, a gift not to be taken lightly.

8. Bridal Mystic Trend in Judaism

Bridal mysticism has never been in the mainstream of Jewish religious practice, although it was and is practised by those seeking the experience of union with God. This practice has a solid theological basis, supported by the Hebrew Bible. The prophet Isaiah says: "For your Maker is your husband, the Lord Almighty is his name..." (Is. 54:5) "... As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you" (Is. 62:5). The Bible's most striking use of bridal symbolism is found in the Song of Solomon, also known as the *Song of Songs*. This book is comprised of a passionate, metaphoric conversation between God and a human soul. In this dialogue, God is represented as the bridegroom and soul the bride. As it opens, the bride says to her beloved:

> Let Him kiss me with the kisses of His mouth,
> for Your love is more delightful than wine.
> Pleasing is the fragrance of Your perfumes;
> Your name is like perfume poured out.
> No wonder the maidens love You!
> Take me away with You – let us hurry!
> Let the King bring me into His chambers (Song. 1:2-4).

Later, the bride describes a tender moment:

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[22] Nikhilananda, *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, 115.

> He has taken me to the banquet hall,
> and His banner over me is love.
> Strengthen me with raisins,
> refresh me with apples,
> for I am faint with love.
> His left arm is under my head,
> and His right arm embraces me (Song. 2:4-6).

The bride, finding her lover missing one night, searches for her bridegroom and returns with him to the bridal chamber:

> All night long on my bed
> I looked for the one my heart loves;
> I looked for Him but did not find Him.
> I will get up now and go about the city,
> through its streets and squares;
> I will search for the one my heart loves.
> So I looked for Him but did not find Him.
> The watchmen found me
> as they made their rounds in the city.
> "Have you seen the one my heart loves?"
> Scarcely had I passed them
> when I found the one my heart loves.
> I held Him and would not let Him go
> till I had brought Him to my mother's house,
> to the room of the one who conceived me (Song. 3:1-4).

The bridegroom later sings praising the dazzling beauty of his bride, using surprisingly sensuous language:

> How beautiful you are, my darling!
> Oh, how beautiful!
> Your eyes behind your veil are doves.
> Your hair is like a flock of goats
> descending from Mount Gilead.
> You have stolen my heart, my sister, my bride;
> you have stolen my heart
> with one glance of your eyes,
> with one jewel of your necklace.
> How delightful is your love, my sister, my bride!
> How much more pleasing is your love than wine,
> and the fragrance of your perfume than any spice!

Your lips drop sweetness as the honeycomb, my bride;
milk and honey are under your tongue.
The fragrance of your garments is like that of Lebanon (Song. 4:1, 9-11).

8. Christian Bridal Mysticism

In Christianity, there is a rich tradition of bridal mysticism. It uses nuptial and erotic imagery to describe the soul's relation with God. There are many scriptural passages (Isa. 54:5-6; 62:4-5; Jer. 2:2; 3:20; Hos. 2:19; Ezek. 16:8; Mt. 9:15; 2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:25-27; Rev. 10:7-9; 19:7-9; 21:2; 22:17) that describe the relationship between Israel and God or Church and Christ along this line. The Fathers of the Church continued this tradition through their writings. Origen's[23] *Commentary on the Song of Songs* is a clear example of this trend. This unusual piece of biblical literature is a narrative of the most sacred of human events, the love between two persons. It is primarily a human love song, though it is also described allegorically as God's relationship with his people. Rather than being an embarrassment, the vivid sensuousness and even eroticism of the Song portraying celebration of sexual love. In the 12th century, Bernard of Clairvaux borrowed images of human love, sexual experience, and marriage from the *Song of Songs*, and Richard of St. Victor used the symbolic language of betrothal, marriage, wedlock, and the fruitfulness of the soul to describe the developing union of the soul with God. This imagery was elaborated in the 13th century lay movement of the Beguines. They described their experience of mystical union in terms of ecstasy, erotic sexuality, and passionate loving devotion. The author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Theresa of Avila, and John of the Cross later likened the loving, transforming union of the soul with God to mystical marriage, in which God and the contemplative become one in spirit and love. In this practice, Christ is considered the bridegroom while practitioners envision themselves as brides of Christ, even if they happen to be male. The goal of this practice is to experience blissful, ecstatic union with God as one's beloved.

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[23] Origen of Alexandria (185-254 CE) is considered one of the greatest of all Christian theologians. As a philosopher, he is famous for composing the seminal work of Christian Neo-Platonism, *On First Principles*. Origen lived through a turbulent period of the Christian Church, when persecution was widespread and little or no doctrinal consensus existed among various regional churches.

8.1. Foundations of Bridal Mysticism in the New Testament

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul addressed the faithful of Corinth as follows: "... I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him" (2 Cor. 11:2). In the Book of Revelations, bridal symbolism is employed in this metaphoric verse: "Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready" (Rev. 19:7). Numerous passages in the Bible bear witness to an idea that in the same way that man and woman are to become 'one flesh', human beings should become the faithful spouse of the divine bridegroom. Once the dynamics of male, female, and the mental/spiritual dimension of a true and genuine marriage is envisioned, we must begin to apply this concept to every aspect of our lives.

Jesus frequently used figures drawn from marriage to illustrate his teaching concerning the coming of the kingdom, as Paul did concerning Christ and the Church. Both the Old and the New Testaments warn us that there are two paths – the narrow path that leads to Life, and the broad one that is walked by the multitudes of people into destruction. When our attention is directed towards mundane affairs, we are said to be carnal, and we belong to this world. When we are able to direct our attention towards heavenly affairs, then we are moving in a spiritual direction, and our consciousness is actually expanding. Paul stated:

> It is good for a man not to touch a woman... But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this... An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs – how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world – how he can please his wife – and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world – how she can please her husband (1 Cor. 7:1; 26-35).

Paul's observation that it would be better for man not to touch a woman is based on a number of factors. In not understanding the sacredness and depth of the relationship's potential, men are merely squandering away the vital energy that could instead be channelled in a better way than to be lost in nature. Our physical bodies were not created to torment us; rather, every inclination was manifest within us for a higher reason and purpose that we must embrace and raise to its highest expression. It is not until we understand that the attractions and urges of men and women to come together goes far beyond a biological need, that we can begin to perceive both the laws working within and without us, as well as the forces that will bring about our eventual destiny.

The coming together of the sexes is initiated by a need that is manifest in the human soul; once properly understood from a higher perspective, it can be used to perceive the movement of every aspect of Creation itself. The human soul, which is neither male nor female, dwells in a realm where these forces of mind exist in harmony. Once this is understood, we can look beyond the realm of physical attraction, and understand that the deeper foundation of human sexual appetite is the absolute need to be complete and to know oneself. The problem that exists in the physical relationship between a human male and female is that there will always be something lacking in their relationships, until they begin to perceive that the void exists within themselves. This means that those forces and appetites we perceive as carnal and sensual can never be satisfied until we have returned to a state of Oneness with our Creator and the Source of Being.

Genuine religion is marriage. The word 'religion' originated from the Latin expression '*re legare*', which means 'to join' or 'to bring together'. This indicates that marriage and religion have the same goal – union. The true consummation of marriage is where two persons actually become *one flesh*! It is not until he – a Christian who professes his allegiance to Christ with his lips – becomes the bride of Christ, *one flesh*, that he is a Genuine Christian. There is the need for an absolute subjugation. In today's world the term subjection has become a dirty word. The idea that a wife must be in subjection to her husband has been denigrated, maligned, and attacked as maleficent by the modern feminist movements which argue that women must be freed from what they perceive to be male domination. Yet, without the oneness and harmony between husband and wife, the vital life-force cannot be raised up into a higher state of consciousness. We must re-merge the male and female paradoxes of mind within us in an endeavour to enter into the next stage of birth. In order to become *one flesh* and enter into the divine marriage, the bride and bridegroom must move into a total and complete self-gift to the other half. What this ultimately means is that the secrets and mysteries of God are at their essence so simple in their fundamental element that the very meaning of life and all of creation can be embraced by every person who has ever lived. All we have to do is strive to negate the polarities of life wherever and whenever we encounter them.

8.2. Bridal Mysticism in Early Christian Writings

The bride-bridegroom relationship was not just a conceptual, philosophical doctrine. For some Christian mystics, it formed the experiential framework for their main spiritual practice. In prayerful meditation and contemplation, such mystics became the brides of Christ, entering into a spiritual marriage which enabled them experience passionate, mystical union with their bridegroom, Jesus.

Although bridal mysticism is a rich tradition, there were people who found these metaphors vulgar or offensive. They had a tendency to condemn indiscriminately anything associated with sexuality as evil or sinful, as they failed to see the purity and sanctity of spiritual marriage. Anticipating such narrow views, another Christian mystic, Gregory of Nyssa, insists that one should be ashamed of celibacy:

> Happy they who have still the power of choosing the better way, and have not debarred themselves from it by engagements of the secular life, as we have, whom a gulf now divides from Glorious virginity: no one can climb up to that who has once planted his foot upon the secular life.[24]

Many of those mystics were male, so they had to grapple with being 'male brides'. They did so by understanding their souls to be neither male nor female, thus, transcending gender divide itself. Either a female or a male human being can envisage an affectionate relationship with God; thus, the motif of the bride of God is supra-sexual. Origen, the third-century Christian mystic, in his famous exegesis of the *Song of Songs* – with his spiritualized concept of the bride – lays the foundations of a Christian bridal mysticism in which a supra-sexual soul (i.e., the soul of either a man or a woman) could take the position of a bride.

A blissful absorption can remove obstacles to experiencing God's fullness. A fifth century Christian mystic, Dionysius, says that we are "led into a godlike oneness, into a unity reflecting God."[25] He advises us: "Leave behind everything perceived and understood ... and strive upward as much as you can toward union with Him who is beyond all being and knowledge."[26] Spiritual marriage is consummated in a blissful union when the mystic is finally overcome by God's irresistible power and is penetrated by divine love. About this union, Origen writes quite explicitly:

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[24] Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2907.htm

[25] Dionysius, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid, New York: Paulist Press, 1987, 51.

> If there is anyone who has been pierced with the lovable spear of His knowledge, so that he sighs and longs for Him day and night, is able to speak of nothing else, wishes to hear of nothing else, can think of nothing else, and is not disposed to desire, seek, or hope for anything other than Him; then such a soul truly says, "I have been wounded by love."[27]

The rapture of sexual ecstasy could be considered a partial expression of the boundless fullness experienced by mystics. Sexual desire is a power that draws one towards the beloved. Mystics consider such lust a natural but misdirected expression of the yearning for union with God. These mystics might not be completely free from sexual desires. Though dedicated to discipline and celibacy, they are still subject to normal human cravings. Until they achieve perfection, such cravings will persist. The blissful oneness experienced in human love is limited, whereas the mystic's experience is infinite. From the mystic's perspective, sexual love is a small taste of the limitless joy possible in God's fullness. The highest joy, the ultimate experience of love, is intimate communion with God.

However, there are well-intentioned adherents to mysticism who simply ignore their lusty feelings, concentrating instead on seeking God alone. Others, however, acknowledge and accept these feelings. They understand that repressing strong desires can be psychologically unhealthy and harmful. They know that their 'never fully dealt with desires' will return with a vengeance, sooner or later, probably at the weakest moments in their lives to collect the toll. At the same time, they are fully aware that immersing themselves in romantic and sexual activities would divert them from their true goal. Instead of denying or repressing these yearnings, some mystics redirect their passion away from sensual experience and towards spiritual growth. Their energies are harnessed and transmuted into a power that draws them towards absorption in God. This redirection is quite different than some forms of *tantra* in which actual sexual practices are used for purely spiritual purposes. Instead, these mystics undertake a discipline whereby natural urges are transformed or sublimated.

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[26] Dionysius, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, 135.

[27] Origen, *Light from Light*, trans. Dupre and Wiseman, New York: Paulist Press, 1988, 29.

Sublimation is not a process of destroying urges; it refines them, literally making them sublime, perfect, and sacred. Christian theologians call this bridal mysticism, the practice of turning and tuning our human emotions towards God. This practice of redirecting human passion from the sensual to the sacred is highly regarded in several traditions. The Carmelite mystics in the Catholic Christian tradition are well-known in this regard.

8.3. Bridal Mysticism and the Carmelite Mystics

The term mystical marriage was used by John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila to designate the highest state of Christian perfection attainable in this life. Espousal to Christ or spiritual marriage denotes the state of a human soul living intimately united to God through grace and love (2 Cor. 11:2). It is understood as a 'transforming' union between soul and God, requiring extraordinary graces. The 'transforming' union is a permanent state higher than and distinct from the transitory spiritual betrothal. Mystical marriage constitutes a consummate union of love, total possession, a fusion of 'lives', in which the soul is made one with God, made divine, by participation, without losing its identity. In his famous mystical poem, *Dark Night of the Soul* (stanzas 6-8), John of the Cross gives us a vivid picture of the experience of the bride at the zenith of her mystical union:

> Upon my flowering breast
> which I kept wholly for him alone,
> there he lay sleeping,
> and I caressing him
> there in a breeze from the fanning cedars.
>   When the breeze blew from the turret,
>   as I parted his hair,
>   it wounded my neck
>   with its gentle hand,
>   suspending all my senses.
> I abandoned and forgot myself,
> laying my face on my Beloved;
> all things ceased; I went out from myself,
> leaving my cares
> forgotten among the lilies.

To be wounded by love is to be penetrated by God, to receive His love deep within, becoming one with Him in an intimate spiritual embrace. About the consummation of spiritual marriage, John of the Cross explains:

> The spiritual marriage is incomparably greater than the spiritual espousal, for it is a total transformation in the beloved in which each surrenders the entire possession of the self to the other with a certain consummation of the union of love. The soul thereby becomes divine, becomes God through participation, insofar as possible in this life. Just as in the consummation of carnal marriage there are two in one flesh ... so also when the spiritual marriage between God and the soul is consummated, there are two natures in one spirit and love.[28]

Teresa of Avila's poem, "*Dilectus Meus Mihi*,"[29] or, "My Beloved Is Mine," a title obviously taken from the *Song of Songs*, clearly depicts the above mentioned sentiments described by John of the Cross in a very precise manner:

When the sweet Hunter shot and wounded me
My soul rested upon Love's arms.
And regaining a new life
I have changed in such a way,
    That I am my Beloved's
    And my Beloved is mine.
    I have surrendered to Him
    And to such a great extent
That I am my Beloved's
And my Beloved is mine.
He wounded me with a love arrow
And my soul became one with her Creator.
    I do not want any other love,
    For to my God I have surrendered.
    I am my Beloved's
    And my Beloved is mine.

Declaring his bridal status, John of the Cross says: "I do not want any other love, for to my God I have surrendered. I am my Beloved's and my Beloved is mine." This becomes still clearer when, in the commentary on the *Spiritual Canticle*, we see, placed over against each other, the hiding of the Bridegroom in the Bosom of His Father and His discovery by the Bride, when He sleeps in her own lap by virtue of her over-shadowing.

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[28] St. John of the Cross, *John of the Cross: Selected Writings*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, New York: Paulist Press, 1987, 257.

[29] St. Teresa of Avila, *Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, vol. 3, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, Trivandrum: Carmel International Publishing House, 2006, 379.

"Beloved," the bride cries to her loved one, "Beloved, where dost Thou hide Thyself?" "O Bride," writes John of the Cross, "Your Bridegroom is the treasure hid in the field of your own soul, a treasure for the obtaining of which the wise merchant gave all his possessions." It is reasonable to renounce all private interests in exchange of this supreme treasure; to withdraw from all created things and to hide in the innermost hiding place of one's soul. The bride will shut the door, that is, withdraw herself from all created things and talk to her Beloved in secret. Thus, hidden with the Bridegroom, the bride will feel His presence in secret, enjoy and caress Him in secret and rejoice with Him in being secret, i.e., beyond everything the senses can reach and the tongues can express. Now, the bride knows that the lover she seeks is hidden in her own heart, and diligently remains in secret with Him so that she would feel Him and embrace Him with the tenderest love. It arouses no surprise that St. John, where he speaks of the bounties of God, dispenses thousands. He lays particular stress on the Incarnation of God, which is the ground, where shines the ideal of our mystical union with God.

All other things, says St. John, God did in passing, as it were. In His Son, however, He saw all things and bestowed on them His beauty and His love. Through the Incarnation, He gave these a supernatural existence and lifted them up, together with human being, to the glory of God. Through the glory of the Incarnation of His Son and His resurrection, according to the flesh, the Father has not only ennobled all creatures, but clothed them also with beauty and dignity. Contemplating this secret, the soul is wounded by love. St. John clearly expresses that the Bridegroom, resting in His bride, celebrates the mystery of His Incarnation. He applies to the bride what we so eagerly apply to Our Lady: *Hortus conclusus, soror mea sponsa* (Enclosed garden, reserved for my Bridegroom). There she will embrace only Him; she will be united intimately with Him, with His nature without any meditation. This takes place only in the spiritual marriage, which is an embrace between God and the soul. In this union, John proceeds, that which is communicated is God Himself, Who gives Himself to the soul, at the same time, restoring her to a peerless loveliness. Both have grown into one, just as the pane of glass and the sunbeam that passes through it are one.

Let us not forget it that, time and again, St. John returns to the inexhaustible mystery of the Incarnation. It would be tempting to relate the manner in which St. John further describes the re-creating of the soul in God; she in God and God in her, taking His efficiency from hers. St. John says that that is exactly the reason why the bride should follow Jesus with His cross, stripped of everything and of themselves. When St. John reminds us that, especially at the beginning, one cannot constantly be in contemplation, he says that the soul should then ever in all its thoughts, acts, good deeds, and undertakings have recourse to holy thoughts and meditations, from which it will draw more fervent piety and greater advantage. But above all, should it resort to the life, the sufferings and the death of Jesus Christ, to teach itself to imitate Jesus' life; to yield in everything, in all its acts and deeds, in life and death.

8.4. Bridal Mysticism and Bernard of Clairvaux

Another practitioner of bridal mysticism was the much-revered Saint Bernard of Clairvaux[30] (1090-1153), a Cistercian monk. He becomes the classic guide for those who follow the path of love in Christian spirituality.[31] Among his works, *On Loving God* and *Sermons on the Song of Songs* give a thorough treatment of bridal mysticism. According to Jean Leclercq, for Bernard, love was the sole object of the scriptures: "Everything comes from and must lead to love… Out of love God seeks us and wants us to seek him. He longs for us, draws us to himself, and is present to us through his powerful words and in his Word."[32] In his *Sermons on the Song of Solomon*, he described his experience of being mystically "penetrated" by his bridegroom. According to him, the soul adheres to Christ with all its strength; lives for Him; allows itself to be ruled by Him (*In Cant. Serm.* 85, 12). However, according to Theresa Moritz, Bernard gave priority to the church, the community of believers, over individual Christians in the role of the bride:

> When he [Bernard] first identifies the subject of the Song, Bernard places the marriage of Christ and the Church before the union of Christ and the soul. Furthermore, when Bernard interprets a text under two explicitly different allegorical senses, be consistently

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[30] St. Bernard played a decisive role in the monastic reform of the twelfth century, stimulating the development of the newly founded Cistercian Order and infusing into its spirituality his own dynamic vision. He gave impetus to two devotions that flourished in the later Middle Ages, becoming major forces in subsequent spirituality, the humanity of Christ and bridal mysticism.

[31] Ewert Cousins, "Preface" in *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works*, trans. and foreword by G. R. Evans, Classics of Western Spirituality Series, New York and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987, 5.

[32] Jean Leclercq, "Introduction" in *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works*, 32.

> speaks first of the Church and Christ and then uses their union as a model for the relationship which he urges the individual soul to seek.[33]

The focus of Bernard's bridal mysticism is on the incarnate Christ, and the goal is the ecstatic union of bride and bridegroom; by being united with the incarnate Christ, the community of believers and the individual Christian soul become ultimately united with God. Bernard pointed out that in the *Song of Songs* this quest for union is expressed by the word 'kiss' in the following verse: "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth." Bernard devoted his first nine sermons to "the kiss" and "kiss of the mouth" and their allegorical meaning and implications for Christians. Leclercq wrote in this connection that, for Bernard, "The kiss of the Father and the Son is the Holy Spirit. Christ gives the kiss to his spouse, or bride, whom he fills with his Spirit. The Spirit in turn unites the bride to the Father through the Son."[34] In the second sermon, Bernard wrote:

> Shall I not find that a richer grace is poured out upon me from him whom the Father has anointed with the oil of gladness more than all his companions, if he will deign to kiss me with the kiss of his mouth (Ps. 44:8)? His living and effective word (Heb. 4:12) is a kiss; not a meeting of lips, which can sometimes be deceptive about the state of the heart, but a full infusion of joys, a revelation of secrets, a wonderful and inseparable mingling of the light from above and the mind on which it is shed, which, when it is joined with God, is one spirit with him (1 Cor. 6:17).[35]

In the third sermon, Bernard elaborated further the theme of the kiss: "if any one once receives the spiritual kiss of Christ's mouth he seeks eagerly to have it again and again... It is a sealed-up fountain ... to which no stranger has access, but he who drinks from it thirsts for more."[36] There is a progression for Bernard from the kiss of the feet to the kiss of the hands and then to the mouth. Addressing fellow monks, he would urge them to begin with the kiss of the feet by being humble and free from pride. However, the ascent to the "kiss of the mouth" is irresistible. It is gained after "we grow in grace and learn to trust in the Lord." Then, "our experience of love increases until we come to feel God's kiss on the mouth."[37] Bernard, in this context, spoke of the infrequent "visit" of the bridegroom to the bride. Such visits are sources of joy and agony, at the same time:

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[33] Theresa Moritz, "The Church as Bride in Bernard of Clairvaux's Sermons on the Song of Songs" in *The Chimaeras of His Age: Studies on Bernard of Clairvaux* (Studies in Medieval Cistercian History 5), eds. E. R. Elder and J. R. Sommerfeldt, Cistercian Studies Series 63, Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1980, 3.

[34] Leclercq, "Introduction," *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works*, 47.

[35] *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works* (Sermon 2,1.2), 216.

[36] *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works* (Sermon 3), 221.

> The Bride pines away with love and is in cruel torment; having enjoyed union with the Beloved, she now finds it more painful to be separated from him. The Bridegroom's slowness to return is a bitter affliction to the Bride and his absence only heightens both her desire and her sorrow. However he may hurry to ease her impatience, she is consumed with longing until he returns.[38]

The bride's longing for the bridegroom is intensified over periods of his absence:

> "Come back, my beloved," Bernard exclaims after each visit of the Bridegroom Jesus comes so that the soul will cling to him; he goes away so that the soul will call him back. He wants us to love him and takes certain steps to win our love: He gives himself so that we will enjoy his presence; he then leaves us so that we will long for it even more.[39]

It is interesting to note that Bernard did not consider marital love profane. According to Leclercq, "St. Bernard draws a close parallel between 'fleshly union' (*carnale connubium*) and 'spiritual marriage' (*spirituale matrimonium*). This analogy is based on constant and realistic description of conjugal love."[40] Bernard condemns those as heretics who say "that the products of sexual congress are unclean."[41] "Nothing is unclean except to one who thinks it unclean." In fact, he suggests:

> Copulation and child-bearing are means to salvation for married folk: "A woman shall be 'saved through child-bearing if she continues in faith' [1 Tim. 2:15]. Children shall be strengthened by the new birth of baptism [see 1 Tim. 3:5]. And adults not able to preserve

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[37] Leclercq, "Introduction," *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works*, 47.

[38] Leclercq, "Introduction," *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works*, 50-51.

[39] Leclercq, "Introduction," *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works*, 52.

[40] John R. Sommerfeldt, *Bernard of Clairvaux on the Spirituality of Relationship*, New York and Mahwah, NJ: The Newman Press, 2004, 52, citing Jean Leclercq, *Monks on Marriage: A Twelfth-Century View*, New York: Seabury Press, 1982, 79.

[41] Sommerfeldt, *Bernard of Clairvaux on the Spirituality of Relationship*, 53.

> continence shall be redeemed by the thirtyfold fruit of marriage [see Mt. 13:8]."[42]

Thus, for Bernard, "Married love is, in one sense, the most complete form of human love, since it engages all the faculties of the soul – intellect, will, and feelings – and the body as well."[43] In terms of Bernard's theology, the ecstatic experience of union can only be sustained in the afterlife, as the "union" between the bride and bridegroom is consummated fully only in "heaven," where, using the language of Bernard, the bride is transformed and "deified." Bernard wrote:

> To be thus affected is to be deified... As a drop of water mingled in wine is seen to pass away utterly from itself, while it takes on the taste and colour of the wine; as a kindled and glowing iron becomes most like the fire, having put off its former and natural form; and as the air, when flooded with the light of the sun, is transformed into the same clarity of light, so that it seems to be not merely illumined, but the light itself: so it will need be that all human affection in the Saints will then, in some ineffable way, melt from itself and be entirely poured over into the will of God.[44]

According to Bernard, the final goal of spiritual union is uniting with God. There are three stages in this journey towards union. The first stage is humility, emptying oneself of one's ego, or "I-ness," the sense of being an "achiever." In this, one is guided by the Son. The second stage is that of mercy or charity, which is reached under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is in this stage that one "recovers" one's "divine likeness," since God has created human beings in God's "image" and "likeness."[45] To reach the third and highest level, one needs to be "caught up" (*raptus*) which is effected in it without its co-operation. The state of rapture cannot be sustained permanently as long as we have the "body of flesh." From there arises the situation of the bride who feels abandoned by the bridegroom and yearns to be reunited. These levels may be compared with the three kinds of kisses. The first stage corresponds to the kiss of the feet; the second, to the kiss of the hand; and the third, to the kiss of the mouth.

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[42] Sommerfeldt, *Bernard of Clairvaux on the Spirituality of Relationship*, 53.

[43] Sommerfeldt, *Bernard of Clairvaux on the Spirituality of Relationship*, 55.

[44] Cited in Butler, *Western Mysticism*, Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2003, 109. Butler notes that mystics like Ruysbroeck, John of the Cross, etc, too, made use of similes of water, iron, and air to describe the union of the soul with God.

[45] Jean Leclercq, *Bernard of Clairvaux and the Cistercian Spirit*, trans. Claire Lavoie, Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1976, 76.

The final step is the ineffable kiss of the mouth, a gracious condescension of God which ravishes the soul. This kiss is the highest favour a human being can ask for, and represents that real mystical experience in which the soul is united to God. In the spiritual marriage the soul loses all thought of itself. Such ecstasy, doubtless, is only a foretaste of eternal happiness; nevertheless, it gives the enraptured soul the highest degree of bliss which it is capable of sustaining. Bernard's mystical life caused him to experience the reality of Jesus with intensity and in a manner altogether novel for his times.

8.5. Bridal Mysticism and Attitude of the Church

Unlike the general belief, Catholic hierarchy was and is very positive towards this form of mysticism. Not only great mystics arose during her part centuries but also numerous official documents released by the hierarchy bear witness to this truth. Catholic interpreters of the *Song of Songs*, from the third-century theologian Origen onwards, have always understood the bridegroom to represent Christ and the bride to represent all his believers collectively as the Church. It is in the Church that Christ fulfils and reveals his own mystery as the purpose of God's plan: "to unite all things in him." St. Paul calls the nuptial union of Christ and the Church "a great mystery." Because she is united to Christ as to her bridegroom, she becomes a mystery in her turn. (Eph. 5:32; 3:9-11; 5:25-27). Contemplating this mystery in her, Paul exclaims: "Christ in you, the hope of glory."[46] In the Church, this communion of human beings with God, in the "love [that] never ends," is the purpose which governs everything in her that is a sacramental means, tied to this passing world. "[The Church's] structure is totally ordered to the holiness of Christ's members. And holiness is measured according to the 'great mystery' in which the Bride responds with the gift of love to the gift of the Bridegroom."[47] Those who are united with Christ will form the community of the redeemed, "the holy city" of God, "the bride, the wife of the Lamb" (Rev. 21:9). This is explained in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* as follows:

> The unity of Christ and the Church, head and members of one Body, also implies the distinction of the two within a personal relationship. This aspect is often expressed by the image of bridegroom and bride. The theme of Christ as Bridegroom of the Church was prepared for

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[46] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §772.

[47] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §773.

> by the prophets and announced by John the Baptist. The Lord referred to himself as the "bridegroom." The Apostle speaks of the whole Church and of each of the faithful, members of his Body, as a bride "betrothed" to Christ the Lord so as to become but one spirit with him. The Church is the spotless bride of the spotless Lamb.[48]

Those who are united with Christ will form the community of the redeemed, "the holy city" of God, "the Bride, the wife of the Lamb." Every Catholic nun in convents around the world is a bride of Christ. They are ritually married to Jesus when they take monastic vows and wear a wedding band to demonstrate their married status. The Catechism of the Catholic Church describes them as consecrated virgins:

> Virgins, who, committed to the holy plan of following Christ more closely, are consecrated to God by the diocesan bishop according to the approved liturgical rite, are betrothed mystically to Christ, the Son of God, and are dedicated to the service of the Church. By this solemn rite (*Consecratio virginum*), the virgin is "constituted ... a sacred person, a transcendent sign of the Church's love for Christ, and an eschatological image of this heavenly Bride of Christ and of the life to come.[49]

Pope Benedict XVI, in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, sheds more light and clarity into this matter:

> The Eucharist, as the sacrament of charity, has a particular relationship with the love of man and woman united in marriage. A deeper understanding of this relationship is needed at the present time. Pope John Paul II frequently spoke of the nuptial character of the Eucharist and its special relationship with the sacrament of Matrimony: "The Eucharist is the sacrament of our redemption. It is the sacrament of the Bridegroom and of the Bride." Moreover, "the entire Christian life bears the mark of the spousal love of Christ and the Church. Already Baptism, the entry into the People of God, is a nuptial mystery; it is so to speak the nuptial bath which precedes the wedding feast, the Eucharist."[50]

Pope John Paul II, in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, has clearly underlined the merits of developing this spousal dimension of Catholic spirituality. He says:

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[48] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §796.

[49] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §796.

[50] Pope Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, §27.

> In the consecrated life, particular importance attaches to the spousal meaning, which recalls the Church's duty to be completely and exclusively devoted to her Spouse, from whom she receives every good thing. This spousal dimension, which is part of all consecrated life, has a particular meaning for women, who find therein their feminine identity and as it were discover the special genius of their relationship with the Lord.[51]

During a General Audience, on March 15, 1995, Pope John Paul II instructed the religious women as to how they are expected to serve the Church and the Lord:

> Today spousal mysticism appears less pronounced in young aspirants to the religious life... The service that Jesus came to fulfil ... includes – special fulfilment of the Church's spousal dimension in union with Christ... According to the Council, the mystery of the Church's spousal union with Christ is represented in every consecrated life (see LG 44), especially through the profession of the evangelical counsel of chastity (see PC 12). It is understandable that this representation is especially realized in the consecrated woman. To her the title *sponsa Christi* is frequently attributed, even in the liturgical texts. Tertullian applied the image of nuptials with God to men and women without distinction when he wrote: "How many men and women in the ranks of the Church have appealed to continence and preferred to be wedded to God..." But it cannot be denied that the feminine soul has a particular capacity to live in a mystical spousal relationship with Christ and, thus, to reproduce in herself the face and heart of his bride, the Church. This is why, in the rite for the profession of women religious and consecrated virgins in the world, the singing or recitation of the antiphon "*Veni sponsa Christi...*" fills their hearts with intense emotion, enveloping those concerned and the whole assembly in an aura of mysticism.[52]

9. Conclusion

This essay examined the symbolic and metaphoric uses of sexuality by mystics of various traditions, including Hinduism and Christianity. It clearly indicates that even celibate men and women of contemplative orders have used imageries based on passionate human love. Instead of condemning sexuality as evil or sinful, they incorporated it into their practices, not physically but symbolically. Christian women religious take their betrothal to Jesus seriously; perfect chastity is an expression of their spousal fidelity to their husband, Jesus Christ. Sublimation of the sex drive is the bedrock of bridal mysticism, not its physical expression. In the view of bridal mystics, chastity is a necessary spiritual, mental, and physical discipline; so is spiritual poverty or kenosis: emptiness of desire and longing. Some aspects of the Catholic priestly vocation too seem distinctly feminine. For example, priests dedicate themselves to serving others, nurturing them spiritually. In fact, Catholic Church places tremendous emphasis on the cultivation of soft, feminine values. This is clearly expressed in the tender beatitudes imparted by Jesus to the faithful gathered at the mount: "Blessed are the meek... Blessed are the merciful... Blessed are the pure in heart... Blessed are the peacemakers..." (Mt. 5:1-11). Both male and female Christians, all who believe, are brides of Christ. The direction for all these must be towards acquiring more feminine characteristics: gentleness, quietness, availability, self-sacrificing spirit, confident, trustful, unquestioning acceptance of everything the Bridegroom decides, etc.

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[51] Pope John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, §34.

[52] www.consecratedvirgins.org/pjp2-b.pdf; www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/audiences/alpha/data/aud19950315en.html,§1.

Describing their spiritual practices, some mystics freely employ romantic and sexual metaphors, ranging from subtle symbolisms to highly erotic imageries. Some speak of God as a lover whose presence is anxiously awaited, like a woman languishing in bed as she awaits a sexual encounter with her sweetheart. Others refer to God as a bridegroom who receives his spiritual bride in marriage and possesses her totally. Some even speak of God as a ravisher by whom one is seduced, penetrated by divine love, and filled with bliss. What distinguishes the bridal mysticism from the lustful indulgence in passionate carnal adventures driven and dominated by instinct could be summarized as follows: While the brute passion for carnal gratification is nothing but wild, tempestuous, self-centred, possessive, blind, partial, jealous, fearful of betrayal, etc., the bridal love is gentle, romantic, self-sacrificing, total, confident, trustful, caring, all leading to a lifelong deliberate course of action that begets peace, joy, and celebration.

Journal of Dharma 34, 1 (January-March 2009), 69-95

KĀMA WITHOUT DHARMA?

Understanding the Ethics of Pleasure in *Kāmasūtra*

Shaji George Kochuthara◆

1. Introduction

Vatsyayana's *Kāmasūtra* is one of the most popular and well-known works of the Indian tradition in the West and other parts of the world. It has become the symbol of Indian eroticism and Indian sexology. *Kāmasūtra* became so well-known in the English speaking world, thanks to the pioneering work of Richard F. Burton. Although it was published in 1883, *Kāmasūtra* began to get great attention worldwide from the 1960s. Many subsequent translations came, but Burton's translation continues to enjoy great authority. *Kāmasūtra* has gained a greater attention and curiosity in the United States of America and the English speaking world with the publication of a recent translation with notes by Wendy Doniger and Sudhir Kakar.[1]

Searching for recent works on *Kāmasūtra*, I visited some of the leading bookshops in Bangalore city. Interestingly, most of these bookshops have a section named '*Kāmasūtra*'. Majority of the books in the section '*Kāmasūtra*', however, are popular erotic novels and other erotic works, both Indian and Western, which have nothing to do with Vatsyayana's *Kāmasūtra*. Most of those books cannot be considered works on sexology even and, in all legitimacy, they can be classified without much deliberation as pornographic. This is indicative of the way

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[1] Mallanga Vatsyayana, *Kamasutra: A New, Complete English Translation of the Sanskrit Text with Excerpts from the Sanskrit Jayamangala Commentary of Yashodhara Indrapada, the Hindi Jaya Commentary of Devadatta Shastri, and Explanatory Notes by the Translators*, trans. Wendy Doniger and Sudhir Kakar, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. Hereafter, referred to as Vatsyayana, *Kamasutra*. I have mainly depended on this translation or, occasionally on that of Sir Richard F. Burton; see also Margaret A. Farley, *Just Love*, New York: Continuum, 2007, 91.

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Kāmasūtra is considered today, the way it is presented and read. It seems that it is approached as a classical work on erotica or sexology, which advocates an unbridled search for and enjoyment of sexual pleasure without any other consideration. Moreover, it should be seriously doubted whether it is advertised as a classical pornographic work, which perhaps accounts for its unusual popularity.[2]

In this essay, we undertake to consider whether the above described approach to the *Kāmasūtra* does justice to its content and the purpose of the author in writing/compiling it, so as to understand its philosophy of life, especially its ethic of pleasure. In order to facilitate this, we shall also attempt to understand the context in which we situate it in the overall context of the Indian vision of life and sexuality. In this project, we shall not be judgemental, but try to understand it in its original context.

2. Indian Approaches to Sexuality

"Nowhere have close relationships of religion and sex been displayed more clearly than in India and, with divine and human models of sexual activity, sacramental views of sex were abundantly illustrated."[3] "The *kāma puruṣārdha* denotes human wellbeing, feeling well, or happiness, resulting out of the gratification of a desire for an object, external or internal."[4] The Hindu conception of a full life consists in the harmony of Dharma, *Artha* and *Kāma*. Although Dharma .has primacy, it is equally emphasised that neither *Artha* nor *Kāma* is to be neglected by a normal human being. Moreover, the concept that *Kāma* is the foundation of Dharma and *Artha*, that it is their essence and womb and the innermost core of the world, is also present in the scriptures.[5] Just like in many other religious traditions, different approaches to sexuality can be identified within Indian religious traditions. They may be perhaps broadly classified as follows.[6]

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[2] For example, see Alka Pande and Lance Dane, *Indian Erotica*, New Delhi: Roli Books, 2001, 42-43: "Yet, unfortunately, the book is one of the most exoticised of Indian texts carted abroad in all manner of forms and meanings… However, it is often viewed merely as a source of titillation by many." This may be evident also from the way some editions of *Kāmasūtra* are published today. For example, see *The Illustrated Kāma Sutra*, Charles Fowkes, ed., London: Hamlyn, 1998. The editor writes: "Although only the '64' – the second part of Sir Richard Burton's version – deals exclusively with sex, this is the '*Kāmasūtra*' of the popular imagination. There is much more to the work than that" (10). But, although such a solemn statement is made, this edition gives only the '64' in detail and the sections before '64' are given very briefly whereas almost everything after '64' is omitted. Doesn't it say something about the way *Kāmasūtra* is presented today to cater to the popular expectations, but draining it of its profound vision? Please note, Margaret A. Farley, *Just Love*, 91: "It is Book II – notably only one book of the seven – that has been the object of prurient interest, satire, and a certain amount of infamy; indeed, the *Kāmasūtra* is frequently equated with the sorts of material in this one book."

[3] Geoffrey Parrinder, *Sex in the World's Religions*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1980, 5.

2.1. Mythical and Ritualistic Concept of Sexuality

In this approach, sexuality is considered godly. This is especially depicted in the creation stories, where the work of creation is presented as the result of the sexual desire and sexual act of god/gods. The Upaniṣads contain descriptions of ritual intercourse. The stories of creation as the result of the sexual intercourse of Prajapati are examples.[7] *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* describes sexual intercourse as a ceremony. The woman is considered the consecrated place where sacrifice is to be performed: "Her lap is a sacrificial altar, her pubic hairs are the sacrificial grass, her skin is the press for the Soma libation, the two lips of the vulva are the fire in the middle."[8] As one is strengthened by the sacrifice, so great is the world of him who practises sexual intercourse with this ritual knowledge. "From this time, at least, there spread the belief that the rewards of a sacrifice could be obtained by a ritually consummated sexual union."[9] The mythical and ritualistic concepts of sexuality are more evident and elaborate in the stories and other texts about Śiva. It is the union of *Puruṣa* with *Prakṛti*, symbolized as the union of Śiva and Śakti, that is believed to create the world. There is, in fact, the cult of worshipping the primordial Mother Goddess and the Father God. Both are symbolically represented in the cult of Śiva Liṅga, which is, in fact, a representation of the *Liṅga* and *Yoni* joined together. *Liṅga* symbolizes Śiva and *Yoni* symbolizes Śakti. "It [*the phallus*] is the tool of procreation and also the giver of divine ecstasy or *ānanda*, which emerges from the union of the phallus and the yoni. *Ānanda* ultimately leads to detachment and enlightenment."[10] Moreover, the godheads are always represented with their female consorts.[11] The stories of gods engaging in love and sexual intercourse with goddesses or humans also have as their underlying principle this approach to sexuality. This is, in general, the basis of fertility cults and rites. What is emphasised more is the procreative dimension of sexuality, although the recreational dimension does not go neglected. The whole creation, fertility, and prosperity are considered to be the blessings of gods, who have engaged/engage in sexual activity. By worshipping the sexual powers of gods – which is often expressed by worshipping representation of the sexual organs of gods – and by engaging in ritual sexual intercourse, the devotees believe to attain fertility, prosperity, and final salvation.

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[4] Rajendra Prasad, *A Conceptual-Analytic Study of Classical Indian Philosophy of Morals History of Science, Part I*, in *Philosophy and Culture in Indian Civilization*, vol. 12, New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 2008, 249.

[5] *Mahabharata*, 12.167: see Parrinder, *Sex in the World's Religions*, 14. However, here *kāma* is more as a precondition for all the other *puruṣārthas*. "Unless an individual has a desire to attain *artha*, to follow *dharma*, or to attain *mokṣa*, he cannot have *artha*, *dharma*, or *mokṣa*." Prasad, *A Conceptual-Analytic Study*, 250.

[6] It should be kept in mind, however, that we cannot make a watertight division of different approaches. The origin and foundation of different approaches can be seen in the same *purāṇas* and in the stories of the same gods and goddesses. Similarly, elements of different approaches can be found in the same approach. I have attempted this classification taking into consideration their major emphasis.

[7] *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 1.4.

[8] *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 6.4.

[9] Parrinder, *Sex in the World's Religions*, 18.

2.2. Mystical Concept of Sexuality

The relationship and union between God and the human being/soul are symbolically presented in sensual and erotic language. The longing of the soul/human for God is described in vivid and explicit imageries of the sexual love and union of the devotee with the deity. Uninhibited description and narrative of the desire for the lover/deity, the pain of separation and the joy in union are presented in sexual terms. Usually, the devotee is the female and the deity is the male. The *Kṛṣṇalīlā*, especially the love-play of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā, in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, is the best example for this. Other works in the *Bhakti* tradition also contain many such descriptions and stories.[12] "The *gopīs*' love for the youthful Kṛṣṇa became the symbol of the love of the soul for God, and this self-abandonment to the divine became central to the cult of Kṛṣṇa… God is in love with the soul, and the soul with God. In this divine love-affair, God is necessarily the male, the soul the female…"[13] Rādhā's sexual passion for Kṛṣṇa and her adultery in leaving her husband are symbolic of the loving devotion that a *bhakta* should have for the Lord. Here, sexuality, sexual love, and union are made use for the purpose of describing the union of a *bhakta* and the deity, perhaps because no other imagery can better express the divine-human intimacy and union. Sexuality is the symbol of the highest union and intimacy that is possible between the *bhakta* and the deity. Thus, sexuality is raised into the realm of spirituality and mysticism. Although the descriptions of sexual union and expressions of love do not in reality speak about sex or man-woman relationship, indirectly a message can be taken for the actual man-woman relationship as well, namely, human beings have the actual experience of the union and intimacy that can be lived between a man and a woman, an intimacy that surpasses all limits and involves the totality of the two persons. Here, it may be noted that there is no mention about the procreative dimension of sexuality, but only the affective and unitive dimensions of sexuality.

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[10] Pande and Dane, *Indian Erotica*, 75; see also, 54-79.

[11] Subodh Kapoor, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Heritage*, vol. 45: *Vatsyayana*, New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 2002, 3.

[12] Among love poetry based on the love of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā, *Gītā Govinda*, the works of Chandi Das, of Chaitanya (16th century), of the Ālvārs, etc., are among the most popular. Chaitanya used to dress himself as Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā.

2.3. Tantric Concept of Sexuality

In the *Tantric* system, in which mainly the Mother Goddess is worshipped, sexuality occupies a central role. *Tantra* is said to predate all texts, Śiva and Devi themselves being the authors. *Tantra*, instead of a withdrawal, encourages the fullest acceptance of human desires and feelings, since they are the via media between the physical world and the inner reality. The aim is not the discovery of the unknown, but the realisation of the real, as *Viśvasara Tantra* puts it: "What is here, is elsewhere; what is not here, is nowhere."[14] That is, *Tantra* is not a philosophy of the denial of the world or the physical, but of their affirmation. The world and the body are means of attaining spiritual realization. The body is not the enemy of the soul; the matter and spirit are not two opposing forces fighting with each other. The body is the means, through which alone the human can come to spiritual fulfilment. Spiritual powers are hidden in the body itself.

The duality of the male (*puruṣa*) and the female (*prakṛti* or *śakti*) is the basis of everything in *Tantra*. *Puruṣa* is static and it can create only through the union with the *prakṛti*, the kinetic energy. "The *tantrics* view the universe as being one with themselves. The psychological and biological functions of the human body are a tool through which the ultimate energy, the *kuṇdalini śakti*, can be awakened to unite with the supreme being, Lord Śiva."[15] The *kuṇdalini śakti* lies coiled in the spinal cord, called *chakras* and when it is awakened, it results in opening the unfathomable energy in the brain. This can be aroused through *prāṇāyāma* and meditation. Another means of awakening the *kuṇdalini*, according to some schools of *Tantra*, is sexual interaction and sexual intercourse. "There is such intense sexual energy in the body, says *tantra*, that it can liberate the psyche of an individual."[16] Sex is a means of awakening the *kuṇdalini*, of joining the female and male principles in the body, through which alone the spiritual powers of the body will be ultimately released and realized. Hence, sexual union becomes a ritual for spiritual realization. In practice, various rites, *mantras* and prayers are prescribed for each stage of sexual union and detailed instructions are given how the sexual act is to be conducted. The roles of both the male and female partners are equally important since only through the perfect blending of the female and the male can the spiritual realization be attained. The love or personal communion of the partners is not at all the goal. The partner is rather a male/female principle, a means of attaining the spiritual realization. Hence, in some sects, the practice of indiscriminately choosing the partner from the group for sex was practised.[17] "Also, sex is neither immoral nor moral; it is amoral."[18] Here again, there is, in reality, no importance given to the procreative dimension of sexuality. Moreover, the aspect of personal love and union is also not emphasised. What is important is the union of the male and the female, as a means of releasing the hidden powers of the individual, which ultimately leads to the union with the Ultimate.

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[13] R. C. Zaehner, *Hinduism*, London: Oxford University Press, 1962, 166-167.
[14] Pande and Dane, *Indian Erotica*, 80.

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[15] Pande and Dane, *Indian Erotica*, 82.

[16] Pande and Dane, *Indian Erotica*, 84.

[17] Tantric sex also has elements of ritualistic sex. At the same time, perhaps a distinction can be made on the basis that, in general, the ritualistic sex has as the object fertility and prosperity, whereas Tantric sex aims at the spiritual realization of the partners.

[18] Pande and Dane, *Indian Erotica*, 85. Perhaps it is important to keep in mind the distinction that is made among the different schools of Tantra, namely, *dakṣiṇāchāra* (right-hand path), *vamāchāra* (left-hand path, which recommended the five M's, namely, *madya*, *māmsa*, *matsya*, *mudra* – parched cereal – and *maithuna*. See Parrinder, *Sex in the World's Religions*, 37 and Pande and Dane, *Indian Erotica*, 88.

2.4. *Kāmaśāstra*

Kāmaśāstra is the science of love and sex. This can be said to be the Indian sexology. Elements of Ayurveda and eugenics also can be seen in this. Like *Arthaśāstra*, *Kāmaśāstra* is a practical science that begins with the teaching on the three aims of life. Just as *Arthaśāstra* is concerned with presenting *artha* (attainment and rejoicing of earthly happiness), *Kāmaśāstra* is concerned merely to teach the means and manner through which man may enjoy *kāma* the best.[19] *Kāma*, although often understood as sexual pleasure, "denotes the whole range of possible experience within the sphere of love, sex, sensual gratification and delight. *Kāma* is wish, desire, carnal gratification, lust, love, and affection."[20] In the *Kāmasūtra*, Vatsyayana explains how this science got developed: In the beginning, after having created men and women, the Brahma laid down rules for regulating their existence with regard to Dharma, *Artha* and *Kāma*. Of these, those which treated of Dharma were separately written by Manu and those related to *Artha* were compiled by Bṛhaspati; those related to *Kāma* were expounded in one thousand chapters by Nandi. What was written by Nandi was reproduced in an abbreviated form in five hundred chapters by Śvetaketu. This was again reproduced in further abridged form in one hundred and fifty chapters by Babhravya. These one hundred and fifty chapters were put together in seven parts by seven different authors. Vatsyayana, combining the work of all these authors and putting together the different parts, composed an abstract, the *Kāmasūtra*.[21,22] Here, Vatsyayana is trying to situate *Kāmaśāstra* in general, and *Kāmasūtra* in particular, in the Indian religious tradition. Following Vatsyayana, there are also other works, like that of Kokkoka's *Ratirahasya* (written between 10-12th century), Kalyana Malla's *Ananga Ranga*, etc. However,

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[19] Kapoor, *Vatsyayana*, 35.

[20] Heinrich Zimmer, *Philosophies of India*, ed. Joseph Campbell, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1990 (reprint 2005), 145.

[21] Vatsyayana, *Kamasutra* (Doniger and Kakar), 1.1.1-14, 3-5.

[22] Zimmer points out that, in fact, the treatment on love and sexuality can be seen in the Vedas and the Upaniṣads. For example, a 13th part of the whole of *Atharvaveda* (41 out of 536 items) is devoted to the art of love and sexuality. "This old Vedic material has never been studied and treated in comparison with the much later formulae preserved to us in such works as Vatsyayana's *Kāmasūtra*, yet it discloses the originally sacred and authoritative character of the doctrine that appears in the later words in a rather secularized, worldly form – as a kind of *ars amandi* for courtesans and gentlemen-about-town." Zimmer, *Philosophies of India*, 146.

Vatsyayana's *Kāmasūtra* remains the most authoritative and foundational work. *Kāmaśāstra*s deal with the sex and man-woman relationship. Their chief concern is to help the human being attain pleasure. Although they are aware of and concerned about other *Puruṣarthās*, their emphasis is on *Kāma*, and "strictly disregard the discouraging insights and devastating ascetic prescriptions… The case is similar to that of the Hindu handbooks of the science of politics, where all the principles of virtue are disregarded except insofar as a mask of morality may serve the purpose of the power specialist."[23] They also speak about family and the importance of the progeny, but what they underscore is the dimension of man-woman relationship and the attainment of pleasure in their union. They do not refer to the ritualistic or mystical dimensions of sexuality or engage in detailed ethical analysis, but rather approach it as a science based on empirical data. Everything, however, is oriented towards the overall wellbeing of the human person, who is a social and religious being.

These different approaches to sexuality existed side by side within Hinduism, some traditions or sects giving more importance to a particular approach or adopting only one. However, there was no attempt from a particular sect or tradition to condemn other approaches to sexuality. Different approaches were accepted as equally valid and as having their own value.

3. *Kāmasūtra*: Author and the Text

Kāmasūtra was composed by Mallanga Vatsyayana (Mallanga is the personal name and Vatsyayana is the name of the *gotra*) between the 1st and the 5th century AD. Many scholars are of the opinion that it was written in the 3rd century AD, more possibly in the second half of it.[24] It was written in the form of *sūtra*s or aphorisms. Though commentaries must have been written on *Kāmasūtra* – as was the practice – the first authoritative commentary extant to us today is the *Jayamangala* commentary of Yashodhara Indrapada, which was not written earlier than the 11th century.

In the introductory section, as already pointed out, Vatsyayana ascribes the authority of his work to seers prior to him and limits his role to that of compiling what contained in their works. This may be intended to give greater authority and validity to his work by attributing to it a semidivine origin.[25] Scholars, however, have opined that Vatsyayana is more the author than the compiler and that even if we accept that Vatsyayana was a compiler, his genius and originality are evident from the deep insights he had of the human psyche, of physiology of sexual responses and enjoyment, of the social life and practices of different peoples of his times, and of sexual practices and behaviour. The mythological nature of the origin of *Kāmasūtra*, as narrated by Vatsyayana, may have another purpose as well:

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[23] Zimmer, *Philosophies of India*, 145.

[24] For a detailed discussion on the date of composition of *Kāmasūtra*, see Kapoor, *Vatsyayana*, 69-108.

> Its point is towards the importance of the pursuit of *kāma* as a *puruṣārtha* and towards the respectable character of anyone's studying matters relating to *kāma* and the methods or techniques of attaining the kind of wellbeing which *kāma*, as a value, denotes… Vatsyayana's objective, thus, clearly is to aver that the pursuit of sexual pleasure in the most effective way and to the greatest possible extent is as respectable a human value as any other human value may be, that is, that there is nothing profane, or intrinsically evil, in pursuing it.[26]

Vatsyayana himself states that he has been a lifetime celibate. This is not much questioned in the Indian tradition. However, there are those who do not take it for granted and hold that Vatsyayana has presented himself like this "only to add to his account a *yogic* authority, since it might have been believed in his time that what was received in a state of *yogic* concentration could neither be anything questionable nor anything undesirable."[27]

However, we need to be clear about one thing: *Kāmasūtra* is not listed among the sacred books of India. It might have been read by many in the era in which it was composed. But, how far it was used by Indians in the later centuries is not clear. However, it was never condemned, nor was its authority questioned. Moreover, perhaps no other single work has so much influenced the religious art and literature following its compilation.

Kāmasūtra is divided into seven sections or parts: (1) Society and Social Concepts: attainments of Dharma, *Artha*, and *Kāma*; Sixty-four arts; the lifestyle of the *nāgaraka*, his companions, etc.; on women fit and unfit for sexual union; on taking another man's wife; and on friends and messengers. (2) On Sexual Union (the famous '64', since it deals with eight subjects, each of which is eight types): sexual typology; kinds of union – embracing, kissing, pressing, biting; sexual positions, unusual sexual acts; slapping and accompanying moaning; on females acting the part of males; on oral; on how to begin and end the sexual union. (3) On the Acquisition of a Wife: betrothal and marriage; creating confidence in the girl; courtship; on gaining a girl by the man and the man by the girl; devious devices for marriage. (4) About a Wife: life of a virtuous wife and her behaviour in the absence of her husband; relationship between the senior and junior wives, remarried virgin widow, a wife unlucky in love, women of king's harem and a husband who has many wives. (5) Other Men's Wives: characteristics of men and women and men who have success with women and women who are easily gained over; About gaining over a woman; state of a woman's mind; the business of a go-between; love of persons in authority for the wives of other men; women of the royal harem, and on keeping of one's wife. (6) About Courtesans: courtesan's resorting to men, the kind of the desirable man; on courtesan's living with a man as his wife; on the means of getting money; about reunion with an ex-lover; on different kinds of gain; different kinds of profits and on different kinds of courtesans. (7) On the Means of Attracting Others to Yourself: on adornments, subjugating the hearts of others and on tonic medicines; on rekindling exhausted passion, the ways of enlarging the penis and on unusual techniques.

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[25] Kapoor, *Vatsyayana*, 7.

[26] Prasad, *A Conceptual-Analytic Study*, 255.

[27] Prasad, *A Conceptual-Analytic Study*, 255.

4. Social and Family Life at the Time of *Kāmasūtra*

The ideal life described by Vatsyayana is that of a *nāgaraka*, a city-dweller, by extension any cultured human being. "It can be inferred from the *Kāmasūtra* that in the urban culture of the times, the *nāgaraka* was deeply concerned with his sexual impulses."[28] From the detailed instructions that Vatsyayana gives to the *nāgaraka* on keeping his household, on his relations and friends, on his food habits, on his hygienic and aesthetic habits, on his intellectual and cultural engagements, on his relationship with women and so on we get a vivid picture of the ideals of social life of that time. Clearly, such a life presupposes a considerably high economic wellbeing: "It is apparent that working men and women could not really have been part of the *Kāmasūtra* pantheon: they would not have had the time for the elaborate, pre-sexual preparations."[29] However, this may not indicate that Vatsyayana is addressing a scant minority of the society, considering the prosperity that India had in those days. The society as a whole seems to have led a peaceful life and it could afford high intellectual activity, social amusements, and religious festivals. Only such a society could invest time and energy for a systematic thinking on the science of pleasure.

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[28] Pande and Dane, *Indian Erotica*, 43.

[29] Pande and Dane, *Indian Erotica*, 45.

> A gay and happy people who worshipped their gods, performed their rituals but enjoyed life with all its refinements to the full is the picture of Indian society which is seen in Vatsyayana. That this was not an idealistic presentation may be seen from other evidence, but is clear from the text itself, because what our author attempts to do is not to describe an ideal society, but to instruct people how to live the life of the senses in society as it existed.[30]

This is also evident in the man-woman relationship. The picture that we get is different from that of the present-day Indian society:

> The *Kāmasūtra* was possible in an ancient Indian society that was liberated, happy and candid when it came to sexual affairs. Moreover, society was still more or less tribal. Women moved freely in public and young men courted girls without eyebrows being raised. Marriage as an institution had been established, but sometimes functioned on a plural basis. Both pre-marital and extra-marital sex were common. Most notably, courtesans were admired and socially accepted, and not looked down upon as is the case today.[31]

It was a society that enjoyed art, literature, dance, drama, and sports. Free and cordial relationship between man and woman was encouraged and practised. Regarding sexuality, different sexual phenomena such as homosexuality, lesbianism, etc., were known and accepted.

There are also differing opinions regarding the vision of life and social context of *Kāmasutra* and other writings in the *Kāmaśastra* tradition. For example, Heinrich Zimmer points out that the dominant attitude in Hinduism was that of austerity, chastity, and extreme restraint, marked by an emphasis on purely spiritual pursuits and an absorption in religious and mystical experiences. *Kāmaśāstra*s intended to correct this extreme approach to life. They also tried to ward off the frustration of married people in a society where marriages of convenience prevailed over marriage of love. "No doubt there were many dull and painful households where a little study of the courtesan's science could have been of immense service. It was for a society of frozen emotions, not libertine, that this compendium of the techniques of adjustment and stimulation was compiled."[32] It would be beyond the scope of this essay to establish what kind of a society actually led to the compilation of *Kāmasūtra* and similar works. We can, without much deliberation, say that different views of life and different approaches to sexuality existed side by side in Hinduism and they simultaneously reflected on the social life. However, *Kāmasūtra* did not limit itself rigidly to married life and marital sexuality. *Ananga Ranga*, a later work of the 16th century, instead addressed the married people and considered sex outside marriage as destructive.

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[30] Kapoor, *Vatsyayana*, 34.

[31] Pande and Dane, *Indian Erotica*, 41.

4.1. Marriage

Regarding marriage, Vatsyayana agrees with the ideals and procedures and rituals prescribed by the *Dharmaśāstras*. However, in agreement with his general approach, he also refers to the customs from a commonsense point of view without making much ethical judgements. Until the completion of studies, one was expected to be a *brahmachāri*. The Vedic tradition held the obtaining of a son who would offer sacrifices for one's father as the goal of marriage. Although Vatsyayana is chiefly concerned with the physical aspects of marriage, he does not ignore the aspects of worldly gains, social position, and the spiritual welfare of the couple. "A good marriage secures the ends of *Dharma* and *Artha* – that is, spiritual as well as social and economic welfare and besides, progeny, increase of relatives and friends and also untarnished, genuine love."[33] "As for marriage, the *Kāmasūtra* believes in the idea of compatibility. This should not just be physical but extend to social and economic equality between families and partners as well. Values, beliefs and living standards should be common and shared... Happy married life rests, says the *Kāmasūtra*, on a substratum of love, respect and trust."[34] Marriage was to take place with a virgin belonging to the same caste. This shows Vatsyayana's practical sense and an awareness of the social system. Sexual relationships with women of both higher and lower castes, with public women or widows, was not approved as befitting, nor was it prohibited since the object was only pleasure. However, such a woman was not to become the lawful wife or to give birth to a lawful progeny. The *Dharmaśāstras* hold that offerings by such an offspring will not be acceptable to the gods.[35] Vatsyayana gives a long list of the qualities required of the bride, but as the ultimate norm, he says, he will be a happy husband who marries the woman on whom his heart and his eyes are set. Hence, he should not consider any other woman.[36] That is, not the physical charm and other concerns, but love was the ultimate norm. The importance given to love is clear, again, from the fact that he considers *Gāndharva* as the most preferred from of marriage:

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[32] Zimmer, *Philosophies of India*, 39.

[33] Kapoor, *Vatsyayana*, 174.

[34] Pande and Dane, *Indian Erotica*, 45.

> … because, he declares, love is the fruit of all the forms of marriage that can be conceived of, and love is more in evidence here than in any other forms where considerations of birth, money or other qualities are the deciding factors. It brings forth happiness, is not accompanied by all the troubles of a lengthy negotiation and ceremonial, and what is more important, is the result of mutual love.[37]

Among the wealthy and the powerful, polygamy was prevalent, though monogamy was not unknown. Vatsyayana says that the wealthy people had generally a plurality of spouses who were very miserable, indeed, as the husband was but one and the claimants to his affection were many; and he gives the advice that it is better to have a poor husband even though he may not have many qualities to recommend him than to have a clever man whose favours have to be shared with many.[38] This piece of advice given to women shows that Vatsyayana considers one-to-one relationship based on love and equality as the ideal form of marriage.

4.2. Position of Women and the Life of Courtesans

From the descriptions given by Vatsyayana, we understand that the dignity of woman was acknowledged and that her capabilities as a person were respected. The woman's role was not that of a mere object of pleasure. Women were literate, though higher education perhaps was not so common among them. The woman was supposed to develop her skills and talents. This is evident from the list of 64 arts that she was expected to master. However, it is important to make a distinction between *nāyika* and the wife of the *nāgaraka*. The *nāyika* is not identical with the wife. The *nāyika* is a highly educated and cultured woman of great accomplishments. She has easy access to the elite and high ranks of the society. She can be a maiden, a twice married woman or a courtesan. Enjoyment – of all kinds – with the *nāyika* was not prohibited by Dharma. There are different sections in the *Kāmasūtra* 'About the Wife' and 'About Courtesans'.

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[35] Kapoor, *Vatsyayana*, 175.

[36] Vatsyayana, *Kamasutra* (Doniger and Kakar), 3.1.13, 76.

[37] Kapoor, *Vatsyayana*, 193.

[38] Vatsyayana, *Kamasutra* (Doniger and Kakar), 3.4.50-52, 90.

The courtesans were a special class of women, highly educated and cultured. Traditionally, a distinction is made between *kulatas* (mere prostitutes) and *ganikas* (cultured courtesans), and Vatsyayana follows this distinction. He says that one who is versed in arts obtains the name of a *ganika* or a woman of society, of high quality, and receives a seat of honour in the assemblage of men. She is, moreover, always respected by the king and praised by learned men and her favour being sought by all, as she becomes an object of universal regard.[39]

The enjoyment of pleasure and the attainment of respect through association with respectable and powerful men was part of the life of the courtesans. However, for her, the important *puruṣārtha* was *Artha*. Sexuality, for her was a means of obtaining *Artha*. Even when she would live 'like a wife' with a man, she should be mindful of this. Here, again, Vatsyayana's basic concept of the goals of life and their interrelationship is clear. Even when she would enjoy *Kāma*, she should not forget that *Artha* is more important for her than *Kāma*.

Evidently, all these show a kind of double morality. Unconditional fidelity was expected of a wife, whereas the husband was given more freedom, whether to have more than one wife or to have sexual relationship with other women.

5. *Kāmasūtra*: A Book on Eroticism?

Kāmasūtra, though it deals with sexual enjoyment and ways of heightening sexual pleasure, cannot be considered as belonging to the category of erotica. There is no attempt to identify itself with pornographic literature, but clearly considers itself as a work in the science of love. Similarly, *Kāmasūtra* does not try to belong to the class of romantic literature; it adopts the dry language of aphorisms. It does not limit *kāma* to sexual intercourse and sexual pleasure, but includes all kinds of enjoyments. Moreover, rather than a work on sexual relationships, it has to be considered as dealing with man-woman relationship, in the given social context and prevailing practices. Although techniques for heightening sexual pleasure are given, it does not advocate a hedonistic enjoyment of pleasure, neither is it about pleasure which is physical alone. Sexual pleasure is to be enjoyed in the context of a relationship, which was evidently not restricted to the monogamous marriage, according to the customs of the times.

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[39] Vatsyayana, *Kamasutra* (Doniger and Kakar), 6.1.1-20, 131-135.

6. Deep Knowledge of Female Psyche and Sexuality

Kāmasūtra, although written by a man, contains a deep understanding of the female psyche and sexuality. The man is asked to take into account the differences of female psyche and the physiology of female sexual responses and is asked to create first the confidence in the woman. An atmosphere of freedom and dialogue is to be maintained. The man has to understand the difference in the sexual response of the woman and that attainment orgasm in the woman is generally slower than him and has to help her to reach the orgasm considering this difference. Instructions on winning a woman also give insights into her psychology. In part III, Chapter II, Vatsyayana says:

> Women being of a tender nature, want tender beginnings, and when they are forcibly approached by men with whom they are but slightly acquainted, they sometimes suddenly become haters of sexual connection, and sometimes even haters of the male sex. The man should make use of those devices by which he may be able to establish himself more and more her confidence.[40]

7. Sexology

It has to be acknowledged with admiration that *Kāmasūtra* contains a number of findings of the modern sexology. Vatsyayana does not consider sexuality and sexual pleasure a mere physical phenomenon or instinct or biological drive, but a psychological phenomenon. This is an evident distinction that he makes between animal sexuality and human sexuality. The objection to which he replies indicates that there were attempts to define human sexuality comparing it with animal sexuality. Our admiration for Vatsyayana may be heightened when we consider that other traditions in his time generally took animal sexuality as a model for human sexuality and, thus, for defining the norms regulating human sexual conduct.

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[40] Vatsyayana, *The Kama Sutra*, trans. Richard F. Burton, London: Penguin Books, 1994, 85-86.

Similarly, a detailed knowledge of the male-female sexual anatomy, the difference in male and female psychology, the difference in male and female sexual behaviour, physiology of sexual response cycle and their male-female differences, etc., can be seen in *Kāmasūtra*. Most of the findings of Vatsyayana are verified and confirmed by the modern sexology. *Kāmasūtra* is not shy about sex as an enjoyment; the detailed descriptions about foreplay and about different positions also make clear Vatsyayana's insight into human psychology and sexual behaviour. "The recommended pre-coital activities make the persons involved in the act more relaxed – a point the *Kāmasūtra* is well aware of."[41]

From the beginning till the end, Vatsyayana clearly maintains that his work is on the science of love. He considers the study of this science necessary for the enjoyment of *kāma* and, thus, for a successful life. However, Vatsyayana is well aware of the limitation of this science and importance of spontaneity. Science is only a help for enjoyment, not a hindrance to it: "About these things there cannot be either enumeration or any definite rule. (*Sexual*) congress having once commenced, passion alone gives birth to all the acts of the parties."[42] This principle shows not the limitation of Vatsyayana as a sexologist, but his wisdom and greatness as a sexologist.

8. Philosophy of Life and Ethics of Sex and Pleasure

8.1. Vision of Life and the Role of *Kāma*

The *Puruṣārthas* – Dharma, *Artha*, *Kāma* and *Mokṣa* – and their interrelationship is basic to the Indian vision of life. Vatsyayana begins the work with a salutation to Dharma, *Artha*, and Kama. In the first part of the work, Vatsyayana clearly enunciates the basic vision of life and the philosophy of pleasure. The second chapter shows the interrelationship among Dharma, *Artha*, and *Kāma*:

> Man … should practise Dharma, *Artha*, and *Kāma* at different times and in such a manner that they may harmonize, and not clash in any way. He should acquire learning in his childhood; in his youth and middle age he should perform Dharma and, thus, seek to gain *Mokṣa*, that is, release from further transmigration. Or, because of the

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[41] Pande and Dane, *Indian Erotica*, 48.

[42] Vatsyayana, *The Kama Sutra* (Burton), 65.

> uncertainty of life, he may practise them at times when they are enjoined to be practised.[43]

After defining Dharma and *Artha* and showing the means of acquiring and practising them, Vatsyayana defines *Kāma*: "*Kāma* is the enjoyment of appropriate objects by the five senses of hearing, feeling, seeing, tasting, and smelling, assisted by the mind together with the soul. The ingredient in this is a peculiar contact between the organ of sense and its object, and the consciousness of pleasure that arises from that contact is called *Kāma*."[44] From this definition itself it is clear that *Kāma* is not mere sexual enjoyment. It is also clear that it does not refer to physical pleasure alone, but psychological realm as well. Rather, it is the experience of pleasure in which the body and mind are involved. *Kāma*, since it denotes all kinds of pleasures resulting from any sensuous-mental operation, includes all sorts of aesthetic pleasures. Evidently, it includes sexual pleasure, resulting from emotional, mental, and physical interactions between persons. Following this, Vatsyayana proceeds to the interrelationship among these three: "When all three, Dharma, *Artha*, and *Kāma*, come together, the former is better than the one which follows it; that is, Dharma is better than *Artha*, and *Artha* is better than *Kāma*."[45]

Vatsyayana disagrees with the opinion that *Kāma* does not need any scientific study, since it is practised even by the animals. As human sexuality is different from animal sexuality, scientific and systematic study on *Kāma* is necessary. The gist of Vatsyayana's philosophy of pleasure can be seen in his answer to the following objection: There are those who argue that pleasures should not be sought for since they are obstacles to the practise of Dharma and *Artha*, which are superior to *Kāma*; that pleasures also bring a man into distress and into contact with low persons; that pleasures cause him commit unrighteous deeds, produce impurity, encourage carelessness and levity; they make him despised by all and ruin him and his families.[46] To this objection Vatsyayana replies as follows:

> This objection cannot be sustained, for pleasures, being as necessary for the existence and wellbeing of the body as food, are consequently equally required. They are, moreover, the results of Dharma and *Artha*. Pleasures are, therefore, to be followed with moderation and

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[43] Vatsyayana, *The Kama Sutra* (Burton), 9.

[44] Vatsyayana, *The Kama Sutra* (Burton), 10.

[45] Vatsyayana, *The Kama Sutra* (Burton), 10.

[46] Vatsyayana, *The Kama Sutra* (Burton), 12-13.

> caution. No one refrains from cooking food because there are beggars to ask for it, or from sowing seed because there are deer to destroy the corn when it has grown up.
>
> Thus, a man practising Dharma, *Artha*, and *Kāma* enjoys happiness both in this world and in the world to come. The good perform those actions in which there is no fear as to what is to result from them in the next world, and in which there is no danger to their welfare. Any action which conduces to the practice of Dharma, *Artha*, and *Kāma* together, or of any two, or even of one of them, should be performed, but an action which conduces to the practice of one of them at the expense of the remaining two should not be performed.[47]

In the concluding part of *Kāmasūtra*, Vatsyayana underscores once again that *Kāma* is to be obtained and enjoyed taking into account the principles of Dharma. The enjoyment of *Kāma* disregarding Dharma and *Artha* is destructive and is not the sign of real wisdom:

> He who is acquainted with the true principles of this science pays regard to Dharma, *Artha*, *Kāma*, and to his own experiences, as well as to the teachings of others, and does not act simply on the dictates of his own desire. As for the errors in the science of love I have mentioned in this work, on my own authority as an author, I have, immediately after mentioning them, carefully censured and prohibited them.
>
> An act is never looked upon with indulgence for the simple reason that it is authorized by the science, because it ought to be remembered that it is the intention of the science that the rules which it contains should be acted upon only in particular cases…
>
> This work is not intended to be used merely as an instrument for satisfying our desires. A person acquainted with the true principles of this science, and who preserves his Dharma, *Artha*, and *Kāma*, and has regard for the practices of the people, is sure to obtain the mastery over his senses.
>
> In short, an intelligent and prudent person, attending to Dharma and *Artha*, and attending to *Kāma* also, without becoming the slave of his passions, obtains success in everything that he may undertake.[48]

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[47] Vatsyayana, *The Kama Sutra* (Burton), 13.

[48] Vatsyayana, *The Kama Sutra* (Burton), 197-198.

Kāmasūtra, thus, accepts the value of pleasure and recommends its pursuit. It also has a physical philosophy:

> It sees sexual desires as being in direct relation to the senses of the body which are experienced as emotions and emphasise the urge to be at peace with oneself and the inner unity of the body and mind. Vatsyayana relates physicality to the erotic, without which, he claims, sex is meaningless. Also, since a holistic approach to recreational activities and art forms like dance, music, poetry, and literature helps to develop self-realization, and furthermore since sex is a part of such activities, it is vital.[49]

However, it needs to be regulated by moral principles. This is true not only with regard to sexual desire, but also with regard to any desire and pleasure:

> We cannot live a desireless life because without a desire we cannot do anything. Gratifying a desire yields pleasure, but exceeding a certain limit in gratifying it causes evil effects. It is, therefore, that we do not need to stop gratifying our desires, even sexual desires, but to regulate them, or regulate our efforts to attain any kind of appetitive wellbeing. It is here that morality comes to our help by providing the needed regulation. It offers the guidelines as to which sort of desires are worth satisfying and which sorts are not.[50]

"As an experience, the experience of pleasure is … an intrinsic value in the sense of its being a value not because of its being a means to the attainment of another value, or in the sense of its being a value for which there is no need to give a reason for its being a value. Rather, it is a value because of its being what in itself is."[51] However, in some cases it may not be a positive value, or it may be considered to be a lower value compared to another value. The pursuit and enjoyment of pleasure is a value, but it should not contradict other values or *puruṣārthas*.

The satisfaction of a desire is to be regulated also because of a social reason, namely, to keep the social equilibrium and to avoid social conflicts. Satisfaction of one's desire should not do injustice to others. This is also the role of Dharma.[52]

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[49] Pande and Dane, *Indian Erotica*, 48.

[50] Prasad, *A Conceptual-Analytic Study*, 268.

[51] Prasad, *A Conceptual-Analytic Study*, 266.

[52] Prasad, *A Conceptual-Analytic Study*, 268-269.

8.2. Sexual Ethics in *Kāmasūtra*

Kāma Sutra is the most important and basic book in *Kāmaśastra* tradition or the science of love. As already pointed out, it gives some insights into the ethics of sex and of the interrelationship between *Kāma* and other *Puruṣārthas*. However, apart from occasional remarks on certain practices, Vatsyayana does not intend to give a detailed ethical analysis of all the different sexual practices and the means to attain and heighten sexual pleasure. As a scientific observer, he just records the different practices in different cultures, even those that he himself does not approve:

> As a scientific *shastra*, the *Kamasūtra* is both a model of and a model for..., both descriptive and prescriptive... More precisely, by claiming to be merely descriptive it is able to position its prescriptions and proscriptions as if they were facts rather than suggestions. It situates itself in the no man's land between the world of possibilities and the world of observations, between 'should' and 'is'.[53]

In his commentary on the *Kāmasūtra*, Devadatta Shastri underscores that this aspect of a scientific treatise must be kept in mind while attempting an ethical analysis of *Kāmasūtra*: "In writing his treatise, Vatsyayana was always vigilant in paying due attention to the character and the inherent principles of a treatise... Even when the author of a treatise considers something as base, he gives it a place in his treatise because there are all sorts of people in this world with different characters and inclinations."[54] Justifying Vatsyayana's inclusion of adultery in *Kāmasūtra*, Shastri elucidates further this key concept in understanding its ethics:

> The treatise on religion requires a man to look at another man's wife as if she were his own mother. The *Kāmasūtra*, however, tells us how to seduce another man's wife... A treatise never turns its gaze from reality. The *Kāmasūtra* is not a religious text but it does not transgress social and ethical boundaries.
>
> Based on human psychology, the *Kāmasutra* is a way of looking at the world. After analysing the inclinations of men, good and bad, its conclusions are guided by a concern for human welfare. A treatise incorporates a discussion of both the good and the bad, but one should act only on the good. In the eyes of the author of the *Kāmasūtra*, adultery is a great sin. But how could he deny its

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[53] Vatsyayana, *Kamasutra* (Doniger and Kakar), xvii.

[54] As cited in Vatsyayana, *Kamasutra* (Doniger and Kakar), xix.

> pervasive reality? How could he not discuss this human tendency which has manifested itself throughout the whole of human history?[55]

8.2.1. Personal and Cultural Variations

Kāmasūtra acknowledges cultural variety regarding sexual intercourse and various ways of heightening pleasure. Universal norms and rules valid for all places, persons, and times are not insisted or recommended by him. Acceptability of different practices depends on the practice in the locality, on the person and on the mutual enjoyment of the partners. Even sadomasochist practices are acceptable, if they are mutually enjoyable and if undertaken with respect for the partner. It may be worth noticing that even in modern times such practices are considered to be perversions and that modern sexology only begins to accept that such practices can be beneficial at least in some cases when they are mutually pleasurable. However, here also Vatsyayana cautions us: "In the same way anything that is a local peculiarity should not always be adopted elsewhere, and even in the place where the practice is prevalent, excess of it should always be avoided."[56] Further, he continues: "The sexual techniques cannot be used at all times and on all women. The method must be chosen according to the part of the body, the region, and the time."[57] Regarding such practices, the principle is given as follows:

> The emotions and fantasies conjured up in a moment in the midst of sexual chaos cannot be imagined even in dreams. For, just as a horse in full gallop, blinded by the energy of his own speed, pays no attention to any post or hole or ditch on the path, so two lovers blinded by passion in the friction of sexual battle, are caught up in their fierce energy and pay no attention to danger. And so a man who understands the text will apply it only after he has come to know the delicacy, ferocity, and strength of his young woman, and his own strength.[58]

Thus, *Kāmasūtra*, though it bases itself on Dharma, acknowledges and accepts the cultural, social, and personal differences and variations as valid in the matter of sexuality and sexual behaviour. It does not challenge universal norms, nor does it refuse all other values. However, it does not consider personal and cultural variations as violations of the Dharma or the natural order of things. Spontaneity and variety that do not contradict other values and goals of life are acceptable. Rather, they enhance pleasure which promotes human wellbeing.

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[55] As cited in Vatsyayana, *Kamasutra* (Doniger and Kakar), xx-xxi.

[56] Vatsyayana, *The Kama Sutra* (Burton), 64.

[57] Vatsyayana, *Kamasutra* (Doniger and Kakar), 2.7.35, 60.

[58] Vatsyayana, *Kamasutra* (Doniger and Kakar), 2.7.32-34, 59-60.

8.2.2. The Value of Pleasure

Sexual pleasure in different traditions, both secular and religious, was considered to be oriented towards procreation. Legal systems in general insisted upon procreation as a duty to the state. Religious traditions often considered sexual pleasure as nature's device to induce man to take up the difficult task of procreation. As a result, the intention to procreate was made a necessary condition for the experience of sexual pleasure. Moreover, sexual pleasure was thought to be a distraction for spiritual experience. *Kāmasūtra* seems to put in question the traditions which consider the goal of sexuality merely as procreation and sexual desire and pleasure as aids to procreation. Pleasure itself is considered to be a goal of life, and sexual pleasure as a goal of sexuality, both enriching and necessary for the human person, though not discarding or overlooking the other goals of life. Pleasure is not an enemy of the ultimate ends of life, but a natural and necessary step towards it. The human person cannot think in terms of the soul alone, he/she is body and soul, of which desire and pleasure are necessary and natural. The value of sexual pleasure does not depend on its utility for some other end of sexuality. It is good in itself, because it is necessary for human wellbeing. The ways to heighten sexual pleasure have as their basis this philosophy of pleasure. Moreover, pleasure is not damaging to God-experience; there is no conflict between pleasure and moral life. This does not mean, as already pointed out, that it recommends hedonism. Besides, speaking about marriage, it underscores procreation as its goal. Only that the goodness of pleasure is not defined exclusively in terms of procreation. Similarly, sex is an art, it is a play, and it is an aesthetic engagement and experience. It is not merely the meeting of bodies, but sharing and flowering of different capabilities and aspects of human persons. Human persons in their totality involve in it and are enriched by it.

8.2.3. Sex: An Art and Play

Sex was not just a release of the emotional tension or was it just a hurried activity of a few seconds or minutes; it was an art, a play, in which not merely the body of the partners, but the whole of their persons involved. This is clear from the fact that much time was spent on the preparation of love activities and for preparing the right ambience. The man and the woman were supposed to master different arts and man-woman relationship and sexual intercourse take place in this overall context. The aspects of play and art liberate sexuality, on the one hand, from visualizing it as oriented to the sole purpose of procreation and, on the other, from its aggressiveness and uncontrollability. As a result, refinement of impulses, personal dimensions of love, tenderness, communication, relationship, and mutuality become more important meanings of sexuality. *Kāmasūtra* is not a treatise on hedonistic sexual pleasure, but a treatise on culturing sexuality, conceiving it as an art and play, which promotes human wellbeing.

8.2.4. The Importance of Love

To speak about love as central to sexual ethics and marital life may not sound something new today. However, considering other traditions of his times, both Indian and others, the importance that Vatsyayana gives to love in man-woman relationship is something unique. As mentioned above, after describing all the qualities of the bride, Vatsyayana gives love as the ultimate norm.[59] Marriage and procreation were often considered as duty to the society. On the contrary, Vatsyayana considers it first of all as a loving union of man and woman. Moreover, the love that Vatsyayana speaks about is not in the context of a mystical concept of sexuality; neither is it the romantic love as presented in literary works. Love, according to him, is central to his science. Doesn't it sound something strange when today many speak about 'making love' without love and without 'sentiments'?

8.3. Gender Ethics in *Kāmasūtra*

8.3.1. *Nāgaraka* and His Wife

The life of the *nāgaraka* is one of pleasures, whereas that of his wife is one of duties: She attends to him with all love and devotion; she ministers to his personal needs; does everything according to his likes and dislikes; takes care of his friends, relatives and servants; welcomes with joy when he comes home; accompanies him in his games and sports; attends an assembly only with his permission; does nothing without his permission; should avoid everything that raises suspicion about her fidelity to him; should be moderate in talks and never talk or laugh aloud; should be moderate in her dress and ornaments, but adorns herself in her best when she is to meet her husband; when he is away she puts away all the ornaments, fasts and does not visit others; looks after the performance of daily worship to gods; with the permission of the husband administers the household.[60] Moreover, unconditional fidelity from the part of the wife is demanded, whereas it is not demanded from the husband. He is free to have sexual enjoyment with the courtesans, prostitutes, unmarried women, widows, and even wives of other men. Besides, polygamy is presented as an accepted practice. True, Vatsyayana speaks about polyandry, which was very rarely practised. Here also, he follows his style of just narrating the different customs rather than giving ethical judgements. However, the picture that we get is not that of a society which had practised gender justice and equality of man and woman as we understand today. *Kāmasūtra* may be more feminist than many other works. However, it may be too much to ascribe to it the ideal vision of gender equality. "Even Vatsyayana's description of man-woman union, even of the prevalent or recommended techniques, is more from the point of view of the male than from that of the female."[61]

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[59] This may sound revolutionary even in the present day Indian context of arranged marriages, where money, social status, etc., are more decisive than love!

8.3.2. Women's Desire

Vatsyayana recognises women's desire and women's capacity and right for sexual enjoyment. This may not sound something new in the present context. But we have to consider the fact that for centuries many cultures and traditions doubted whether women had sexual desire, or whether they had the pleasure at all. Women's role in sex and sexual pleasure was considered to be passive only. She was just to respond to the need of the man. Women's desire was something unthinkable and unacceptable. That is why often the role of the woman in sexual play and intercourse was considered to be only 'passive' and 'receptive', and any initiative from her part was considered to be unnatural. Even today, perhaps it is worth noting, many view women's desire as predominantly oriented towards motherhood. *Kāmasūtra*, on the other hand, acknowledges and approves women's initiative and active role in sexual play and takes for granted their desire and pleasure:

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[60] Vatsyayana, *Kamasutra* (Doniger and Kakar), 4.1, 94-97.

[61] Prasad, *A Conceptual-Analytic Study*, 257.

> The *Kamasūtra* emphasises equality, which does not necessarily mean being alike in any way. What is emphasised is the fact that both men and women have similar desires; therefore, the pleasures they gain should also be equal. However, the experience and intensity of satisfaction differ. The ideal manner of attaining this state of supreme bliss comes about when each partner reciprocates with equal ardour. It reinforces the fact that intimate togetherness leads to complete erotic pleasure. In fact, the *Kamasūtra* – though it does not use the word – is aware that women have orgasms. It even stresses that the man, if he is to be the ideal partner, put his pleasure second to hers.[62]

Similarly, in contrast to traditions which do not accept women's active role in sexual act, Vatsyayana recommends women taking initiative in sexual intercourse. In the section on sexual union, he describes different kinds of union in which women take active role.[63] "The inclusion of the woman as an equal partner and equal facilitator of sexual pleasure also establishes the fact that she is an equal, with rights, demands, desires, and needs."[64] That is, "women were seen as equal partners in sexual activity and had equitable rights of pleasure."[65] The woman is not a mere object, but a subject, having her own individuality. Sexual attraction, play, and intercourse are not between one subject and one object, but between two subjects. Or, both man and woman are objects of desire and enjoyment to each other. This recognition of women's desire and their active role can be said to be a great contribution of Vatsyayana. However, here also we should avoid idealization. *Kāmasūtra* has an official male voice, since the author is a man. It is mainly concerned with the life the *nāgaraka* and his enjoyment. The life of the *nāyikā* and other women are treated mostly in relation to his life. Even woman's pleasure seems to be important because her pleasure heightens the pleasure of the man.

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[62] Pande and Dane, *Indian Erotica*, 52.

[63] See Vatsyayana, *Kamasutra* (Doniger and Kakar), 2.8; 2.9, 60-61; 65-69.

[64] Pande and Dane, *Indian Erotica*, 52.

[65] Pande and Dane, *Indian Erotica*, 45.

9. Conclusion

Although there are a number of popular manuals on sex, and sexology has greatly developed, why *Kāmasūtra* has created a renewed interest today? The rediscovery of and interest in the classical wisdom in general seems to be one reason. Especially, in the West, there is a great interest in the wisdom of the Orient and particularly in the Indian tradition. Moreover, the apparent religious context in which *Kāmasūtra* is set gives it a greater authority and acceptance. No doubt, though *Kāmasūtra* was never classified among the sacred books, it was never condemned nor was its authority questioned. It was accepted as an authoritative work in the science of love. Moreover, it inspired a lot of religious literature and art. However, it has to be considered that the purpose of *Kāmasūtra* was not to promote a hedonistic search of pleasure or the search of pleasure for its own sake forgetting all other aspects of life. *Kāmasūtra* says clearly that *Kāma* is to be sought taking into consideration Dharma and *Artha*, and Dharma is the guiding principle. There is no attempt to question the religious authority or the wisdom of different traditions. Besides, while going to details Vatsyayana does not intend to make ethical analysis of different practices, but as a scientific observer wants to record different practices and customs of different places of the time, giving only occasional comments whether those are acceptable or not. Everything is not meant for everyone. It is up to the reader to discern what is meant for him/her taking into account one's person, socio-cultural context, and religious practice. Added to this, we have to consider that Hinduism is not a unified system of doctrine; different traditions existed side by side. What was good in a particular tradition or science was accepted by other traditions and integrated into them without trying to evaluate whether everything in that particular tradition or science was completely acceptable; what could not be accepted was generally overlooked. Hence, to ascribe to *Kāmasūtra* a religious and ethical authority – for all times and places and to whatever is said in it – seems to go beyond the intention of the author.

Kāmasūtra is neither merely a book on lovemaking, nor a mere sex manual, but a reflection on the social and cultural practices of the period as well. Going beyond sex, it aims at making a more complete and holistic society. The *nāgaraka* is not a man who lives in isolation, but is well-integrated into the society. It never refuses the social structures, but demands to regulate the experience of pleasure according to the prevailing social structures and customs. *Kāmasūtra* is a systematic study of the emotional and sensual nature of human impulses and of man-woman relationship. It is an understanding of human life in its different expressions – personal, interpersonal, and social.

On the one hand, conceiving *Kāmasūtra* merely as a sex manual that recommends hedonistic search for pleasure for a post-moral world will be denigrating its wisdom and real purpose. On the other hand, considering it as a complete book on sexual ethics would mean to attribute to it a role and position that Vatsyayana himself did not claim or want. It may be worth remembering that although the wisdom of *Kāmasūtra* was never challenged in the Indian tradition, it has never been considered in the Indian tradition as a basic work on sexual ethics. *Kāmasūtra* has a philosophy of life and of pleasure; it affirms the goodness and value of sexual pleasure; it underscores the need of culturing sexuality; it points out the importance of love and mutuality; it defends woman's desire and pleasure. All these help us even today evaluate our understanding of the mystery of sexuality and the norms that we follow in sexual ethics. The basic principle of *Kāmasūtra*, that *Kāma* is to be practised taking into account its relationship with other *Puruṣārthas*, however, is to be kept in mind. Finally, *Kāmasūtra* is very clear that everything is not meant for everyone. One has to take into consideration one's social and religious context. *Kāma* enhances real wellbeing only when it is in agreement with other values of life.

Journal of Dharma 34, 1 (January-March 2009), 97-106

A LIBERATIVE APPROACH TO ISSUES OF MUSLIM WOMEN IN INDIA

Asghar Ali Engineer◆

1. Introduction

It is a fact that many Muslim women in India lack empowerment and experience grinding poverty, illiteracy, and various restrictions imposed on them by their parents and husbands in their everyday life. When I deliver lectures on rights of women in Islam, participants invariably ask me about the actual plight of women in Muslim society today. I have to offer a lot of explanation as to the reasons of their sad plight. There are certain factors for which Muslims cannot be blamed like poverty. There are, however, certain other factors for which Muslims have to own responsibility like imposing restrictions exclusively upon women, which have nothing to do with Islam. These restrictions are rooted more in social customs and traditions of the past but legitimised in the name of Shari'ah.

2. Status of Women and the Muslim 'Ulama

In May, 2007, an Urdu daily from Mumbai, *Inquilab*, reported about a session of Muslim Personal Law Board, in which the Board is said to have expressed its worries about the Government of India passing a law against domestic violence, whereas the *'Ulama* and *fuqaha'* (jurists) have always permitted beating of women. According to the law against domestic violence, to put it sarcastically, Muslim men have lost right to beat their wives! Could there be any more shocking news about the status of mind of the *'Ulama*, if this report is true? Can there be a right to beat one's wife? Does the Qur'an or the Prophet's *Sunna* allow this? Did the Prophet ever beat his wives? Can anyone quote any instance of this? Is there any verse in the Qur'an permitting wife-beating?

Generally, the *'Ulama* refer to one verse 4:34, which, according to them, permits wife-beating. The translation of the verse is as follows: "Men are maintainers of women, with what Allah has made some of

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them to excel others and with what they spend out of their wealth. So, the good women are obedient (to Allah), guarding the unseen as Allah has guarded. And (as to) those on whose part you fear ill-will, admonish them, and leave them alone in the beds and chastise them. So, if they obey you, seek not a way against them." This is the only verse in the Qur'an, which the *'Ulama* hold against women. All other verses exhort men to fulfil their duties towards women and remind them of women's rights. In fact, the entire discourse on women in the Qur'an is right-based, whereas with regard to men it is duty-based. This above verse occurs in chapter 4, which is on women. Interestingly, there is no chapter on men in the Qur'an. The Qur'an emphasizes equality of men and women (2:228). About 2:228, Maulana Azad says in his *Tarjuman al-Qur'an* that this is a revolutionary declaration of sexual equality formulated 1300 years ago. In the light of all these, how can one think that the Qur'an will allow women to be beaten?

Now, let us come to the expression 'chastise them', which, in Arabic, is *wadribuhunna*. The word *daraba* in Arabic has several meanings. In Lane's dictionary, one finds at least two full pages of meaning of this word *daraba* of which only one meaning is to chastise. Among other meanings is, according to Imam Raghib Asfahani, a distinguished scholar of the Qur'anic terms, for the he camel to go near the she camel. Thus, if this meaning is taken, then it would mean, when she is persuaded, go near her, and not to chastise her. This interpretation is more congenial to the entire discourse on women in the Qur'an.

The Qur'an, again and again, exhorts men to be mindful of women's rights. Then, how can it permit men to chastise women? Even when this meaning of chastisement is taken into consideration, Tabari, a highly respected exegete of the Qur'an, refers to one *hadith* in which the Prophet only permitted very light strike with tooth brush or kerchief, and no more. According to this *hadith*, only a symbolic light strike, so as not to injure, is allowed. But, in the first place, this meaning goes against the spirit of the Qur'an. All modern commentators have rejected this meaning. A Turkish scholar who has worked on the translation of the Qur'an for more than two decades maintains that *daraba* here means to strike out, i.e., if a woman rebels against her husband, then he should, in the last measure, remove her and divorce her as they cannot carry on together.

Another woman scholar from Iran, Laleh Bakhtiar, who has translated the Qur'an from a feminist point of view and has spent forty years on this work, also disagrees with the translation of *daraba* as chastisement. She says: "After 40 years studying and translating books related to the Qur'an, I realized that something was missing: an objective universal and inclusive translation of the Qur'an from its classical Arabic into contemporary English. Most of the 17 English translations I had seen included some interpretation of the verse making a direct comparison between the English and Arabic extremely difficult. Plus, many of the English translations continue to use Arabic words and names such as Allah for God, which can be confusing or even off-putting to new readers." Two things she says about the method that she followed are quite striking: she has looked at all different uses of the word in the text in context before determining the appropriate meaning in English. She used a software to create database of 40,000 nouns and verbs of the Qur'an and 50,000 particles of speech. This method is most appropriate as then alone one can understand the significance of a word, both as verb and noun. The methodology of understanding the Qur'an, which I have developed, includes also collating all the verses of the Qur'an on one subject and, then, inferring the most appropriate meaning. One should remember that no *'alim* (scholar) can avoid being influenced by his/her circumstances, both cultural and political, in understanding the scriptural text. There is no surprise, if the commentators of early Islam understood chastisement by the word *daraba* in their own cultural and political milieu.

Also, Prophet's *Sunna* plays an important role in evolving Shari'ah laws. No one, even the most conservative *'alim* or jurist, has ever referred to the Prophet as ever chastising any of his wives, even when they made unreasonable demands on him. The Qur'an itself refers to an incident in which the Prophet's wives made demand for more worldly goods which the Prophet could not afford. Let alone chastising them, he did not even utter harsh words against them. He simply withdrew into a room and did not speak to his wives for a month and, then, as per the Allah's instruction, explained to his wives that either they should opt for this-worldly goods and separate from him or live with him and expect their reward from Allah. This incident has been referred to in the Qur'anic verses 33:28-29 and also in 66:1-3 and we find, in Sahih Bukhari, reference to this incident that the Prophet temporarily separated from his wives for a month and then reconciled to them. This incident from the Prophet's life clearly illustrates the real meaning of the verse

4:34 referred to above. When wives rebel or try to become difficult, persuade them, then isolate them in bed, then reconcile with them, and do not try to harass them or find way against them. Further, the word *daraba* has been used in the Qur'an in a number of ways and in different forms. For example, in verse 24:31, the word *daraba* has been used in gerund form for covering breasts with head coverings (*aurhani*). Here, *daraba* certainly does not mean beating or chastising anybody.

The occasion of revelation of verse 4:34, as described by Tabari and Kasshaf, both highly respected commentators, is that one woman approached the Prophet complaining, "My husband chastised me without any fault. What should I do?" The Prophet thought for a moment and advised her to go and retaliate. This caused jubilation among women in Madina. But men were worried and rushed to the Prophet and said how will they control their families if their women retaliated against them? Then, this verse was revealed saying men are maintainers of their families and, if women rebel, persuade them, then isolate them in bed and then strike them away, if they are not persuaded, or, according to Imam Raghib Asfahani, go near them after conciliation. This verse is often quoted by men for claiming the license to beat their wives; however, this meaning is not at all in keeping with the Qur'anic spirit. I would urge upon the *'Ulama* to revisit this verse in the entire Qur'anic context and reinterpret it. After revelation of the verse 4:34, women came to the Prophet and inquired if they have inferior status to that of men. The Prophet replied that he would wait for Allah's revelation. Then, he received the concerned revelation in verse 33:35, which reiterates that men and women are equal in every respect and that they will be equally rewarded for their spiritual merits. Thus, the verse 33:35 settles the matter conclusively. This is the last verse regarding the relationship between men and women.

While referring to relation between husband and wife (though the Qur'an does not use the word husband and wife, as the word husband denoted authority but only *zawj* and *zawja*, i.e., one of the couple again denoting equality between the two), the Qur'an says that Allah has created love and compassion between them. The same verse also says that Allah has created the mates so that one finds peace of mind in them. If Allah has created love and compassion and source of peace in women how can it ever permit beating of wives? In fact, one has to take all verses on the subject and read them together to find the real intention of the Qur'an. Chastisement was inferred by the medieval scholars under the influence of their patriarchal cultural milieu. One can discover new meanings, as the Qur'anic words are pregnant with many meanings, each meaning to be discovered in different circumstances, but in keeping with the fundamental Qur'anic principles and values.

Islam greatly raised the status of women more than 1400 years ago and, unfortunately, the *'Ulama* (though not all) still understand the Qur'an in ways which denigrate position of women as it was understood during pre-Islamic days which the Qur'an describes as *jahiliyyah* (period of ignorance). The Qur'an, in fact, came to dispel *jahilliyah* and create enlightenment. Will the *'Ulama* continue to choose ignorance over enlightenment?

3. Divorce in the Qur'an and Shari'ah

In all its discourses on divorce, the Qur'an requires husbands to divorce their wives or to separate them with kindness. The verse 229 of Chapter 2 also talks of kindness while letting them go or separating them: "Divorce may be (pronounced) twice; then keep them in good fellowship (*bi m'arufin*) or let (them) go with kindness (*tasrihun bi ihsan*)." Also ensuring full justice to women, the Qur'an requires arbitration before divorce (4:35). Thus, there cannot be a fairer method for divorce than the one prescribed by the Qur'an. It is so unfortunate that Muslim jurists, under the influence of patriarchal ethos of their societies, ignore all injunctions of the Qur'an and give more credence to prevalent social practices and that too in the name of Islam. All the corpus of laws is referred to as Islamic laws of divine origin. In total contradiction to what the Qur'an prescribes, some jurists not only justify divorce given in a state of anger but also try to describe various states of anger.

What is more central to Islam, justice (*'adl*, *qist*) or a state of proper consciousness in anger? Forget about anger, the Qur'an does not approve of divorce in normal state of consciousness if proper method is not followed for effecting a divorce, which ensures justice for the wife. Any unjust act is *zulm* (oppression, wrong doing). According to the Qur'an, women must be treated with fairness and justice and no act committed in a state of anger (whatever the state of anger) can be a just act. Divorce, in fact, should never be given in a state of anger at all. Whatever state of anger, intense, extreme or moderate, one does lose control of oneself and even if he is conscious of the consequences of his act, he is unable to think rationally. The Qur'an requires husband to remain kind even when divorcing her. Can anyone be kind while pronouncing divorce in a state of anger? Kindness and anger are two opposite states of mind.

There are several instances in which the husband pronounces divorce on getting angry on petty quarrels with his wife. Can, then, such divorces be justified? Often, the husband repents after pronouncing the divorce thrice in a state of anger; many jurists, however, maintain that his wife has been irrevocably divorced and he cannot take her back unless she marries some other man and he divorces her. Husband and wife often quarrel and husband gets angry temporarily and is provoked to pronounce divorce. Can such petty quarrels justifiably become the basis for a divorce? This is not only legally wrong but also morally unjustifiable. As long as the mindset and functioning style of the jurists of Muslim society remain so, can Muslim women ever expect justice from them? On the one hand, these jurists will argue that Islam greatly raised status of women as in pre-Islamic society women were treated as chattels but, on the other, in order to maintain 'manly' authority, bring back those pre-Islamic practices apparently in the divine garb. The Qur'an puts the entire responsibility of treating women fairly and with kindness on men and the jurists give complete authority to men to throw their wives away as per their whims and fancies.

In fact, there is not even a single verse in the Qur'an which exhorts women to treat their husbands with kindness while in their *nikah* (marital bond), whereas there are several verses requiring men to treat their wives with kindness. This was because women were found to be living in a weaker position in that society and Islam has all the sympathy for weaker sections of society. Islam had greatest stress on giving justice to weaker sections of society, including slaves, servants, orphan, widows, and the poor; it is a call for empowering the downtrodden. As I have already pointed out, the Qur'an's sympathy is with *mustad'ifin* (those who have been weakened) (5:28) and the *'Ulama* show all the sympathy with men who have the power over women in our society and juristically give all the power over them. However, justice is more central to the Qur'an and the life of a Muslim society than opinion of any jurist howsoever eminent that jurist may be. Justice is the Qur'an's central principle which cannot be sacrificed on the altar of any jurist's opinion.

If we have to project Islam as a religion of justice and compassion for weaker sections of the society, Muslim society has to revise its jurisprudence completely and prioritize justice over opinions of all past jurists of eminence. Eminence is not a principle; it is only a social status. Justice, however, is a moral value central to Islam. Divorce being a very serious act, it should be treated with utmost caution and responsibility. It breaks families and causes trauma mostly to women and children. According to a well-known *hadith*, Allah has permitted act of divorce with utmost reluctance. Thus, neither the Qur'an nor authentic *hadith* give problem to women, but only inauthentic male authority.

4. Call for Liberation to Muslim Women in Indian Society

Muslim women suffer both from internal and external oppression. Muslim men practise what they themselves believe is Islamic and oppress their women and refuse to entertain any thought of change. Many educated Muslim women, thus, start believing that there can be no liberation within Islam and seek their freedom through secular laws. I conduct workshops for rights of Muslim women and when they listen to what is written in the Qur'an, they say they never thought the Qur'an liberates them; they thought Islam enslaves them. Thus, those who realize the core values of the Qur'an, through a process of enlightenment, become activists of Islamic rights.

Some problems that Muslim women face are of social nature and are common to women of all religions in India. All women face problem of social conservatism as they are reduced to secondary to men. Men are thought to be bread winners and decision makers across religions in India. But only difference is that among Hindus, this situation is fast changing at least in urban areas. Women are becoming self-reliant and, in some cases, they boldly assume the role of decision makers as well. The situation is not so bright as far as Muslim women are concerned.

Non-Muslims generally think that Muslim women are oppressed and face many restrictions. This is largely true but matter is much more complex. There are reasons for Muslim women facing such odds in India. Mostly Muslims are artisans and self-employed and, sociologically speaking, they have a restricted worldview and live in their own universe. Then, there are those Muslims who live in rural areas and are engaged as agricultural labourers and related operations. They tend to be even more conservative.

These sections of society do not know what is written in the Qur'an or *hadith*, much less what are the problems with *hadith* or different schools of law. For them, what the *imam* of their *masjid* says is Allah's *hukm* (injunction) and it must be followed; else, they will be confined to *jahannam* (hell). Mostly, the imams of the mosques also come from poor families and have, in most cases, very limited knowledge of theology and Islamic Shari'ah. The 'fatwas' issued by such imams are based on ignorance. For example, the 'fatwa' issued by the imam of village mosque in case of Imrana (that she should marry her father-in-law who raped her) had absolutely no basis in Shari'ah. Thus, it is important to understand role of society as much as that of religion. Women are oppressed not so much by religion as by society. In order to bring about change in the plight of Muslim women it would be equally necessary to bring about change in socio-economic conditions of Muslims in India. If Muslims, in general, remain poor and illiterate, it will be very difficult to improve conditions of Muslim women.

5. Necessity of Awareness for Change

It is also necessary to understand that things are not totally stagnant on Muslim women's front. An educated middle class is emerging among Indian Muslims – though still small – which is well aware of changing society and need for change among Muslim women. The educated Muslim women, exposed to democratic political processes and electronic and print media, are becoming aware of their rights and are no longer prepared to accept what is being imposed on them in the name of religion.

In last one decade, there have been many positive indications of change. A group of Muslim women developed a standard *nikahnama* (marriage contract) and forced the Muslim Personal Board to adopt it. Though the Board did not adopt it as it is, it did respond to this demand and developed its own *nikahnama*, although it is not very satisfactory to women; nevertheless, the process of change, at the initiative of educated women, has started.

It must be said that the Board's entire functioning is reactive rather than proactive. I must say that it is incapable of being pro-active as it is busy defending medieval inheritance rather than rethinking Islam, as Muhammad Abduh, Fazlur Rehman, Ali Shariati, and many others did in their time. Members of the Board defend *riwayat* (tradition) rather than use *ijtihad* (assert intellectual capacity to reinterpret and rethink issues).

Today, as the world undergoes drastic changes, simply repeating, defending, and stagnating will create discord between the Qur'anic Islam and Shari'ah Islam, on the one hand, and Islamic Shari'ah and the modern world, on the other.

Whether Muslim Personal Law Board changes or not, women are not going to wait indefinitely. They are already on the move. Some Muslim women got together and formed their own board called Muslim Women's Personal Law Board. This board is taking its own stand favouring women on the basis of the Qur'an and the *hadith.* Though Islamic feminism has not emerged in India on full scale, it is on its way.

Certain Muslim women NGOs have come together and constituted the Bhartiya Muslim Mahila Morcha. They have decided to operate within Islamic framework, on the one hand, and Indian Constitutional framework, on the other. It held its first convention in Delhi in early December 2007. Though a hopeful sign, it is far from sufficient. There is great need for the Qur'anic literacy among Muslim women. Unfortunately, the modern secular educated women know neither Arabic nor the authentic Qur'anic teachings. In order to bring real change in the Muslim women's condition, there is great need to have encounter with traditional *'Ulama* on the basis of the Qur'anic injunctions in respect of women. Needless to say, the Qur'an accords equal rights to men and women and exhorts Muslim men of their obligations towards women. However, many of these Qur'anic rights were lost in the Shari'ah formulations in a conservative traditional feudal society. It is for Islamic feminists to revisit the Qur'an and develop the Qur'anic discourses on women's rights.

Most of the Muslim countries have abolished triple divorce also known as oral divorce. India is the only country with second largest population of Muslims, which still upholds validity of oral divorce and orthodox *'Ulama* even uphold divorce given through SMS flying in the face of the Qur'an. It is totally unjust to women and the Qur'an, whose most fundamental value is justice (*'adl* can never permit such unjust form of divorce). The Qur'an has laid down proper procedures for divorce, which, unfortunately, are not followed by Muslims though they swear by the divinity of the Qur'an.

6. Conclusion

India being a secular democratic country, there is much more political and social space available to Muslim women in India compared to their sisters in many other Muslim countries. To avail of this social and political space, increased awareness among women is needed. The greatest stumbling block is, indeed, poverty. One finds even greater urge for modern education among women but poverty pulls them down. Although one cannot expect drastic changes in the plight of Muslim women in India in near future, one can certainly hope for incremental changes.

To empower Muslim women, to reduce rate of childbirth, to usher in religious and social reforms, there is a great need to improve general economic condition which, in turn, will improve educational status of Muslim women and that, in turn, will bring in greater awareness for change. There is also great need for internal critique and, at least, educated Muslim men should attempt an honest self-criticism of condition of women in their community and consolidate efforts for change and reform based on the fundamental values and vision of life enshrined in the Qur'an.

Journal of Dharma 34, 1 (January-March 2009), 107-116

SEXUAL DILEMMAS AND MORAL REASONING

An Approach to Girls' Sexuality and Sexual Pleasure

Vimala Chenginimattam◆

1. Introduction

An equally best and brilliant half of the humanity is conveniently forgotten, ignored, and neglected almost in every field of human sciences; indeed, their great legacy is missing in every sphere. Even though visibility of women has increased more than ever, the actual status of women in many parts of the world reveals instances of domestic and social violence and sexual abuse on young girls and women. Of course, working outside the confines of the home has modified, extended, and improved the lot of many women and their social image too. Even then, women are considered the 'weaker sex', which implies, in comparison to men, that they are not yet able to reach the higher stages of cognitive and moral development. To my mind, these conclusions have been evolved, as not only have the experiences of women not been listened to but also the very experiences have been disfigured, misrepresented, and misunderstood. Hence, the attitude towards them many a time runs the risk of becoming inhuman. A close reading of various unfortunate events that happen in the lives of women across the globe indicates that most of them result from a wrong perception of human sexuality and the nature of woman as a person.

The notable (but not dynamic enough to acknowledge the full dignity of women) teachings of Pope John Paul II have given some signs of hope in the arena of according respect to women for what they are. According to the Catholic Church, the crisis in sexuality today is that sexuality viewed as separate from a loving relationship,[1] which results in the breakdown of relationships and encompasses exploitation and abuse issues. This crisis calls us to reclaim the sacred ground of human sexuality. The Catholic Church through her attractive teachings continuously reminds us of the

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[1] Kurian Kunnumpuram, "Collaboration of Men and Women," *Vidyajyothi* 69, 2 (February 2005), 123.

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sacredness and wholeness of human sexuality. For example, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: "Sexuality affects all aspects of the human person in the unity of body and soul. It especially concerns affectivity, the capacity to love and give life, and in a more general way the aptitude for forming bonds of communion with others."[2] Human sexuality, therefore, includes the wholeness of the human personality. Problems arise when we try to view its components separately. This, in fact, points to the importance and relevance of better insights in understanding human sexuality, especially of women. This, in turn, will help us to have mutual respect in the society and will enable girls to comprehend their own original experience and develop correct moral reasoning to help themselves.

2. Girls' Sexual Dilemmas

Throughout history, a kind of anonymity has pervaded in the girls' and women's sexuality. From the beginning of psychoanalysis itself, the psychoanalysts, like Sigmund Freud (1905), framed female psychology as veiled in what is called an "impenetrable obscurity."[3] Freud tried to understand female sexual life but it continued to remain his "dark continent" (1926), a continent where he could not reach.[4] Some other developmental psychologists, like D. L. Tolman, point out that the real discourse on the sexual desire of girls is missing in the way adolescent female sexuality is conceived and discussed by professionals, including teachers and administrators in schools.[5] The studies found that girls' sexuality was a topic of discussion, but overlooking the real nature and in a way discouraging their actual sexual exploration.

The usual discourses could be categorised, in general, as follows: (1) victimization, e.g., girls are taken advantage of by boys (2) the discourse of disease, e.g., girls need to avoid being infected by STD and AIDS, and

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[2] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1994, §2332.

[3] S. Freud, "The Question of Lay Analysis" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 20, 212.

[4] S. Freud, "Femininity" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 22, 114-116.

[5] D. L. Tolman, "Adolescent Girls, Women and Sexuality: Discerning Dilemmas of Desire" in *Women, Girls and Psychotherapy*: *Reframing Resistance*, eds. C. Gilligan, A. G. Rogers, and D. L. Tolman, New York: Harrington Park Press, 1991, 58.

(3) the discourse of morality, e.g., girls need to behave in a moral fashion that does not include sexual activity, etc. That is, the actual literature on adolescent girls' sexuality is missing and, as Carol Gilligan, a world renowned social ethicist, points out, major developmental theories not only ignored girls' experience, but also silenced the true nature of their sexuality. Moral education in schools is mostly unaware of the absence of an acknowledgement of girls' *embodied sexual feelings*. Generally speaking, girls are told by parents and other adults that they are not supposed to speak about their love and sexuality, only because they are girls.

Deborah L. Tolman, a psychologist, fills this gap by focusing on girls' desires, rather than on the social ills they are usually quizzed on. In her book, *Dilemmas of Desire: Teenage Girls Talk about Sexuality*, Tolman investigates how young women's first sexual experiences may be influenced by societal pressure to dissociate from their own bodies and desires. Tolman shows the alarming dangers – for individuals and society – when girls are afraid to take ownership of their sexuality. From Tolman's research we understand that young women nearly always found barriers to their experiences of desire. She argues that their stories show "how a patriarchal society tries to keep girls and women at bay by forcing or attempting to force, a wedge between their psyches and their bodies and how girls deal with these forces."[6] In general, adolescence is a state of human existence where sexuality, identity, and relationship are heightened, although social taboos restrict girls in this period and they begin to be vulnerable by losing touch with their own thoughts and feelings. As many girls enter into womanhood or when their bodies take on women's contours, they begin to be seen as sexual, and sexuality becomes an aspect of adolescent girl's lives.[7] The above research shows that female sexual orientations are different from that of male, which describes their experience of sexuality and their response to their own sexual desire.

Sexuality is central to what makes us human beings. At the same time, one must be aware of the fact that human sexuality encompasses more than the sexual act itself. Consequently, sexual ethics is concerned about more than specific norms for sexual behaviour. In fact, it is unfair, inaccurate, and ultimately unhelpful to talk as though female sexual development is only about learning to cope with male sexuality.[8] In an essay, Deborah Tolman writes:

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[6] D. L. Tolman, *Dilemmas of Desire: Teenage Girls Talk About Sexuality*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002, 24.

[7] D. L. Tolman, "Doing Desire: Adolescent Girls' Struggles with Sexuality," *Gender and Society* 1 (September 1994), 324.

> I realize that when girls know, experience, and speak about those fabulous feelings in their bodies, trouble follows for them and for their parents, teachers and therapists. Girls' sexual desire upsets people, because it challenges and might upset the cultural mandate which requires that girls (and women) not be connected to their bodies in general, and to their sexual hunger in particular. Girls' sexual desire is an interruption of the condoned version of what happens in girls' bodies. If girls know their desire, what else might they begin to know about themselves and their situation in the culture?[9]

What Tolman wants to affirm is that girls and women are socialized to dissociate their feelings from their sexual selves, which may lead them into abusive or merely unsatisfying lives. She also found out that women have trouble expressing themselves in our society. Therefore, she suggests that silence about the sexual desire of girls is as troublesome as talking about these feelings in open discussion, but without helping them to handle these feelings and desires.

One of the central sexual-dilemmas girls face at this age is that they are asked not to speak of and for themselves. Naturally, it leads to other dangers: feeling guilt and shame, a feeling of wonders and doubt, abusive sexual relations, a tendency to keep secrecy about their sexual feelings, etc. So, an opportunity to know themselves (in terms of what is truthful about them, the rightness and wrongness of their feelings, desires) so as to express themselves is desired. Carol Gilligan has brought out some reasonable studies in this regard. It is she who noticed a 'different voice', a voice which is missing in the human voice in the pervasive silence concerning women in the field of psychology and moral development. Gilligan's studies reveal that, for girls, the issues about sexuality are very much a part of their moral conflicts. At the adolescent period, Gilligan's sample girls expressed their great desire to speak about their sexuality.[10]

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[8] S. Sheffer and J. Sturges, "Adolescent Girls and Sexual Desire," *Mothering* 50 (Fall 1997), 3.

[9] Tolman, "Adolescent Girls, Women and Sexuality," 67.

[10] C. Gilligan, J. M. Taylor, and M. Sullivan, *Between Voice and Silence*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995, 99.

They wanted to discuss their body changes, emotions, and sexual desires, with their mothers, teachers, or some significant adult woman, who could play a significant role in listening to these girls talking about their feelings. Gilligan affirms that through responsive listening to girls, women can help them towards a mature moral reasoning in the situations of their sexual dilemmas. Once girls understand their real experience and deliberate about their sexual dilemmas in a mature manner, they must be able to face their sexuality and deal with it responsibly.

Gilligan made a specific study in order to understand the interaction of moral principles and sexual behaviour. In her concerns for the moral development of girls, she points out that "it is necessary to see sexuality as an important area of moral choice in human life."[11] That is, girls need to make a morally correct choice with regard to their sexuality. This points to the need for an education of correct moral reasoning in order to help girls learn the right way of handling these sexual dilemmas in their lives. Further, according to Gilligan, many girls experience a "crisis of connection," a relational dilemma of how to be oneself and stay in relationship with others who may not want to know the truth of girls' experiences. In such a situation, many girls have a tendency to silence their own thoughts and feelings for the sake of relationships. As a feminine tendency, girls form reasoning based on relationality, i.e., with an attitude of care and concern toward the other. However, they must be prudent to take the responsibility of themselves as that of neighbour or a mature way of self assertion before self-sacrifice.

3. Moral Reasoning and Moral Education

The form of reasoning is very important in dealing with moral choices and resolution of moral dilemmas. In order to do a correct moral reasoning, one must have rightly formed concepts and vision that can function as a frame of reference in critical situation. That is, first of all, girls must have right view about one's own personhood and the world. This frame of reference enables them to make the right moral judgment which, in turn, enables them to take the responsibility to actualize it in concrete action. To be moral, girls must be able to control their feelings by reason.

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[11] C. Gilligan, "Sexual Dilemmas at the High-School Level," in *Sexuality and Human Values*: *The Personal Dimension of Human Experience* (98-110), ed. M. Calderone, New York: Association Press, 1974, 98. See also L. S. Cahill, *Sex, Gender and Christian Ethics*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996; reprint in 2000, 9.

From her research, Gilligan developed a model called "hierarchy of reasoning about sex," which concerns "how adolescents think about sexual decisions and what values they take into consideration when deciding about sexual behaviour."[12] The hierarchy of reasoning means that sex at the lower stages of moral development considers it as an instrument to exchange for pleasures without any notion of relationship. The individual developing towards the higher stages of moral reasoning, however, sees sex as an expression of love; in further higher stages sexual relationship is seen to be involving ethical deliberation in which partners deal with each other honestly and responsibly. Still in higher stages, sex must be seen as the gift of God which expresses love relationships, new life, and participation in the image of God. Gilligan proposed, from this study, that girls' ways of dealing with sexual dilemmas is very much related to their growth in moral reasoning capacity. That is, development should lead girls to mature reasoning of the moral issues concerned with sex such as the value of life and love, the value of social welfare and responsibility, their obligation to parents and family within which the relevance of the concept of sex is perceptible. Otherwise girls may be led astray by false ideas and misconceptions and the ultimate outcome of it will be destruction of their own lives.

Education enables girls to engage in critical evaluation of sexually deviated programmes in the mass media or in their own social contexts, which, in turn, enables them develop right and healthy responses.[13] According to Gilligan, the rightness and wrongness of sexual behaviour is drawn from the ethical principles concerning the relationship of human beings to one another in general.[14] Then, the central dynamic of female sexuality is the relational context. Gilligan explains that when sexuality is evaluated in the frame of relationships, then sexual ethics comes to be seen as part of one's general principles for dealing with other people. As a result, instead of asking if sex before marriage is right or wrong, one asks, "How can I relate to others in terms of their just rights and claims and in terms of their welfare?" Here we see that, along with the Catholic Church, Gilligan evaluates sexuality on the basis of human relationships, especially in making sexual choices in the context of love and care. This points to responsible handling of sexuality.

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[12] K. H. Bollerud, S. B. Christopherson, and E. S. Frank, "Girls' Sexual Choices: Looking for What is Right," in *Making Connections*: *The Relational Worlds of Adolescent Girls at Emma Willard School*, eds. C. Gilligan, N. P. Lyons and T. J. Hanmer, London: Harvard University Press, 1990, 275.

[13] J. M. Halstead and M. J. Reiss, *Values in Sex Education*: *From Principles to Practice*, London and New York: Routledge Falmer, 2003, 50.

[14] Gilligan, "Sexual Dilemmas at the High-School Level," 102. See also Tolman, "Adolescent Girls, Women and Sexuality," 56. Again, L. S. Cahill, the woman theologian, affirms that sex is inherently communal and relational. Sex or sexuality always points to human relationship. Cahill, *Sex, Gender and Christian Ethics*, 60.

Due to their inner urge for connectedness/relationship girls are in need of help to develop self-assertion, so that they may learn to take more control over the direction of their lives.[15] From an educational perspective, girls must be helped to have motivation which presupposes the necessary training for assertiveness, namely, in the "art of saying no," at the right time. In this regard, some studies point to how girls especially should develop a stronger feeling of self-worth and become more assertive. Through moral education, girls must be provided with some practice in reasoning, presenting them with possible sexual dilemmas. These possible dilemmas may be, for example, the rightness or wrongness of premarital sex, the nature of sexual rights in marriage, the problem of a high-school girls' pregnancy, and their responsibility to their parents and other relational crisis.

Studies concerning girls suggest that if they are helped to value themselves as sexual subjects, then they will make healthy decisions about their sexual behaviour and experiences.[16] Girls need to be educated to acknowledge themselves as subjects with feelings, emotions, and embodied sexuality, and to realise that all sexual dilemmas result from an attempt to deal with the body as separate from the whole person.[17] So, through an appropriate moral education, girls must be taught and trained to make moral reasoning about their sexuality in the context of subjective relationships, which embody mutual respect and acknowledgment. Such an education will also enable them to see that their bodies are not objects or the possessions of the other, and will help them resist exploitations such as rape, sexual violence, prostitution, pornography, and the denigrating forms of advertising.

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[15] R. Burggraeve, "From Responsible to Meaningful Sexuality: An Ethics of Growth as an Ethics of Mercy for Young People in this Era of AIDS," in *Catholic Ethicists on HIV/Aids Prevention*, ed. J. F. Keenan, New York/London: Continuum, 2000, 306.

[16] G. P. Schner, "The Appeal to Experience," in *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. E. F. Rogers, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002, 25.

[17] In our society, if a woman's body is seen as an object or as a property to be assessed by, and appropriated for the use of others, it comes to be experienced by the women herself as an object, as an alien body. This attitude denies women of their full human potential in a culture desirous of reducing women to sex. Again, in today's so-

Educational institutions often operate under the influence of a sex/gender system, by which women learners suffer from a male-dominated curricula, classroom conduct, and teacher-learner interactions.[18] The Catholic Church reminds us that sex education must be an educational guidance in human love,[19] and that this subject is different from other subjects taught in schools. It is about human relationships and, therefore, includes a central moral dimension. Girls, therefore, need to be provided with opportunities to know and understand their own experiences, feelings, their bodies, and sexual desires; they must also be enabled to acknowledge these experiences in their own voice. Inspired by Gilligan's "relational theory" of women's development, girls' moral education programmes need to be renewed and revamped. With Gilligan, I feel the urgency for the recovery of the authentic "voices" and the capacity to express them, as women's subordination is rooted in the silencing of their voices.[20] Above all, moral education should enable girls to be themselves by valuing and appreciating their own femininity.

Sometimes, the moral education has the common problem of just being caught up by moral reasoning. It is true that moral reasoning is an important component (the highest correlative factor leading to appropriate moral action) in the formation of the mature moral agent. However, educators must take care that their considerations should not stop with

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called developed society, the bodies of women are often seen by the medical establishment, the media, and sex industry, in terms of their relationship to an appropriative masculinity. See P. Johnson, "Sexism," in *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics*, vol. 4, ed. R. Chadwick, London: Academic Press, 1998, 69.

[18] S. Collard and J. Stalker, "Women's Trouble: Women, Gender and the Learning Environment," *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 50 (Summer 1991), 75-76.

[19] SCCE, *Educational Guidance in Human Love*, Boston: St. Paul Books and Media, 1983, §4.

[20] M. A. Mahoney, "The Problem of Silence in Feminist Psychology," *Feminist Studies* 22, 3 (1996), 603.

moral reasoning alone. Instead, this reasoning has to enable the students, the moral agents, to engage in moral actions.[21] That is, mature moral reasoning will lead to right decision and action, complemented by all the faculties of the person, rational, emotional, and affective. According to the Christian anthropological perspective, education must consider the totality of the person.

The methodology used for sexual education in schools needs to be integral and the educators should follow some essential criteria to make their instruction didactically valid.[22] What I mean is that we should be more realistic concerning the problems and sexual dilemmas that girls face in their life situation today and embark on a new and meaningful sexual education. The sexual dimension of the person is not only an object to study or a behaviour to train, but also consists of problems to clarify and to resolve in a well determined existential context of individual and community life.[23] This dimension should permeate indirectly into all subjects taught in the schools, that students may be competent and enabled to make mature moral decisions, in the face of sexual dilemmas, by involving all their faculties: intelligence, will, feelings, and emotions.

4. Conclusion

In short, what is basically required is a change in our worldview, especially pertaining to the world of girls and women, which highlights their true feelings, knowledge, and experience. Sexual learning and sexual expression begin in the womb and continue till the tomb. In our traditional paradigm, sexual desire of girls and women were consistently silenced and they were just counted as object of pleasure for boys and men. In such a long-established tradition, if a girl were asked a question as to her subjective experience, about her knowledge as to how she feels, many a time, she replies from a position as the object of another's judgment; that is, she knows herself in the realm of "sex" as the object of male desire. This is a disintegration of a healthy notion of mind-body understanding, and is alienated from full personhood. For, part of her (or, their) being has been stolen by another. Thus, first of all girls must develop an esteemed vision of themselves, including their understanding of sexual pleasure, which is centred on a relational understanding of human persons who are treated as equals. Through moral education they must be taught what their sexual orientation is and how it is different from that of boys. Indeed, To make healthy decisions about their lives, girls need sensitive and truthful sexual education. They must also have good knowledge of their own feelings, embodied experience, and emotions to protect themselves maturely and to help other girls from their own real and lived knowledge.

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[21] J. A. Freiberg, "Experiential Moral Learning," in *Handbook of Moral Development: Models, Process, Techniques and Research*, ed. G. L. Sapp, Birmingham, Alabama: Religious Education Press, 1986, 186. This is also one of the critiques of Kohlberg, which says that his theory stopped at the high stages of moral reasoning without reaching necessarily into moral action.

[22] R. Zavalloni and T. Fratini, *Educazione sessuale nella scuola*, Roma: Antonianum, 1974, 86.

[23] L. Corrodine and C. Nanni, "Educazione Sessuale," in *Dizionario di Scienze dell'Educazione*, eds. J. M. Prellezo, C. Nanni, and G. Malizia, Roma: Università Pontificia Salesiana, Elle di ci, 1997, 365. See also E. Curtiss, "We Must Give Our Youth Moral Education," *L'Osservatore Romano* 31 (3 August 1994), 3.

Through right moral reasoning they must be corrected, so that they are able to know and acknowledge their sexuality as something within their own authority and embodied feelings. That is, they must know their own sexuality and sexual pleasure as something permeated in their own body and mind or their integrated self. Thus, they can grow in self-esteem and, finally, they will be enabled to take the right moral decision and to accept its responsibility. Likewise, the next generation can change the existing social system, gradually and spontaneously, so that they can live in this world as decent and dignified persons without risking and denying what is naturally given to them.

Journal of Dharma 34, 1 (January-March 2009), 117-127

Reflection

AN EPISTLE OF ST. PAUL ON SEX

A Pauline Response to Issues of Sex in Contemporary Society

Benny Nalkara◆

Greetings

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God and to be a light to the nations two thousand years ago and considered by many as an inspiration even today, to all the members of God's family on earth. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Thanksgiving

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in the entire world. I am glad to know that many among you have been very faithful to the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ which I had proclaimed. My exhortations have become like guiding lights in your paths. My reflections on Christ and Christ-event have become the cornerstone of your theology, worship, and ethics. My ethical admonitions and pastoral guidelines are continued to be practised in your communities and congregations. I do not know how to express my feelings of Joy. It is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ.

Some Clarifications

I am fully aware of the fact that I continue to remain a controversial figure and, to many, my teachings constitute a bone of contention. Many condemn me as a thorough conservative and orthodox especially in matters related to human behaviour and morals, especially *human* sexuality. There is a prevailing criticism among many scholars that I was necessarily unaware of all the findings of modern psychology and sociology. Many split hairs on my observations and views on sexuality, marriage, virginity, etc. For them, I am unaware of the new sexual truths and identities that are produced by science of sexuality and medicines. They also point out the

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© 2009 *Journal of Dharma: Dharmaram Journal of Religions and Philosophies* (Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bangalore), ISSN: 0253-7222

lack of systematic approach in my presentation of human sexuality. Many are worried about the nature of my own sexual experience because little is known about it from my writings and the book of Acts. Some are still pondering over an uncertainty whether Romans 7:7-25 should be viewed as my own story; in particular an uncertainty prevails as to whether the "coveting" of verses 7-8 has a sexual force.

What shall I say now? Shall I justify myself against those who are judging me taking my teachings out of context? What I want to say is that sociological factors should not be interpreted as theological factors and vice versa. Above all, what I want to say is that all are people of their age to some extent. But I am sure that many of you will agree with me that what I shared with my brethren during the first century CE are still relevant and meaningful for the modern times, since human nature has not changed, although times have changed.

Anyway, here I am not intending to write any apologetic letter. On the contrary, I would like to persuade you to reflect upon an alarming situation in the contemporary society in matters of sex and sexuality.

Retrospection on My Own Writings

The greater frequency of references to sexual issues in my writings than in the gospels reflects the laxer sexual mores of Hellenistic society. The then Christian communities were marked by two groups of people – the 'over-converted' ones and the group which had a very loose concept of sexual morality. As you know, this situation was more evident in the Corinthian community, where these over-converted were influenced by the Gnostic thinking. Some of the Christians at Corinth, were *pornoi*, adulterers and homosexually active. I have included the idolaters among these different sexual offenders just to indicate the gravity of their sinfulness. I considered foremost among "the acts of the sinful nature," *porneia* (sexual immorality), impurity, and debauchery (Gal. 5:19; see also 1 Cor. 10:8). I was deeply concerned that the Christian congregations be kept free of such corruptions (Eph. 5:3). I was shocked to know that the Corinthian church was tolerating rather than disciplining persons who were involved in these unbecoming practices (1 Cor. 5: 1-2).

You may well be aware of the fact that I wrote my letters to those communities where men constituted the powerful end of the sex spectrum, and women were relegated to the status of the 'weaker sex'. The promiscuous exploitation of young teenagers and boys by the wealthy and powerful was common. Homosexual relationships were prevalent in the

Greco-Roman world to the extent that it was considerably criticized by some of their philosophers and Jewish writers. This is the background against which I wrote those instructions.

Porneia is used to head the lists of vices in my letters (1 Cor. 5:10, 11; 6:9, Gal. 5:19; Eph. 5:3,5; Col. 3:5; 1 Tim. 1:10). I have placed it as the opposite heading to 'agape' which introduces the list of virtues (Gal. 5:22). My focus in naming *porneia* as one of the principal evils of my age is not in the context of marital relationships or other violations of some deep purity taboos. But when it comes to the abuse of sexuality, I have fearlessly confronted the ways in which it affects the wider social networks of church and society (1 Cor. 5-7). For me, *porneia* is sexual idolatry, which is manifested in abusive, promiscuous, exploitative, and obsessive sexual behaviour, reaching the state of worshipping a creature rather than the creator (Rom. 1:24-32). The consequences of this idolatrous behaviour included all excesses widely known to occur at orgies and dinner parties amongst the rich and famous in the first century: the exploitation of slave girls and boys for the gratification of guests and lewd entertainments of dancing girls, boys, and animals. Some of our brethren had been caught up in this abusive behaviour (1 Cor. 6:11). I tried to articulate very strongly about the corporate nature of our bodily existence as the temple of the Holy Spirit and, thus, their responsibility of keeping away from such vices.

Contemporary Situation

In my second letter to the Corinthians, I had expressed my persisting fear that on returning to Corinth, I would find the sexually licentious still impenitent (2 Cor. 12:21). Today, after almost 2000 years, I am compelled to make some serious observations and comments on an alarming situation in the realm of sexuality in the contemporary society. The world has undergone tremendous change. I am taken aback and amazed to look at the world as a whole and the Christian society in particular. New ideas and concepts like globalization, liberalization, and free market have changed the face of the world. The information revolution has re-formed the human beings. It has become a global village. Now, I am happy that I can address it as a village as I did in my days to some of the early Christian communities. This modern village, however, is polluted and corrupted with so many dehumanizing tendencies and values. Many want to enjoy life and make merry. In their pursuit of pleasure, sex has become a chief method attaining this pleasure; moreover, sexuality has been almost completely identified with its physiological and psychological aspects. Contemporary moral attitudes to extra-marital sexual explorations have become far more tolerant today.

Sex: An Idol

I am afraid to see that sex has again become an idol for many in our age. For some it has become the mark of their identity. Modernity is a world populated by people who define themselves as gay, lesbian, straight, bisexual, bi-curious, exhibitionists, submissive, dominatrix, swingers, switchers, traders, born-again virgins, acrotomophiliacs, furverts, or feeders. In short, we define ourselves in part through our sexuality and sexual orientations. Sexual imagery is used to sell almost every product of our daily life. Still, sexuality is identified with body and you expend enormous amount of energy disciplining and taming your bodies; when you fail, you tend to be ashamed. You may live in a permissive age, but still exhibit almost neurotic uneasiness with the status of being considered as mere bodies. I understand that the laxer sexual mores of the early century is present in all the cultures of the contemporary society. It stems from the greatest poverty of the last half a century: lust and sexual desire have become conflated!

The popular media and images of contemporary culture perpetuate the assumption that in order for some one to have 'good sex', it must be 'naughty', i.e., in a context outside of an exclusive, permanent commitment; thus, the modern day sexual revolution fails to provide the society with a viable vision for responsible and reverent relationships. As a result, sexuality becomes a 'bodily' business and body, especially the body of a woman, becomes a commodity. Thus, sexuality is increasingly reduced to sheer genital behaviour.

Degradation of Sexuality

In the contemporary society, the greatest challenge to sexuality is nothing but the degradation of sexuality. People fail to see it as a divine gift. To be human is to be either a male or a female, to be a sexual being with certain kinds of structural, functional, and behavioural characteristics as essential components of one's nature. Sexuality is, therefore, a fundamental aspect of one's personal identity, not merely an anatomical or biological designation. One is sexual in all one's relationships and forms of self-expression and activity.

As a result of the degradation of sexuality, there are many disorders and issues in the society. People continue to be haunted by a quiet, pervasive ambivalence toward sexuality and human loving. 'Commodification' of persons and 'consumerization' of love are the results of these degradations. There is an increasing number of interpersonal and social conflicts as well as of actions that violate the rights of others such as rape, incest, voyeurism, and other forms of sexual abuse. Family, which is supposed to be the cradle of love, has become the crypt of love. Frequent breakdown of marriages, the rising number of children born to unmarried mothers, violence against women, and the abuse of children are alarmingly increasing. Pre-marital sex, extra-marital sex, paedophilia, homosexuality, gay and lesbian marriages, etc., are still major issues and people try to make these sexual perversions institutionalized through state legislations. The access to more reliable methods of contraception, the legalization of abortion, and relaxation of moral controls on sexuality triggered by sexual revolution detached sexuality from its traditional association with sin and disease. The sexually transmitted disease like HIV/AIDS from the early 1980's have added new and dangerous and a demeaning look to the crisis of sexuality. We have also witnessed the politicization of sexuality in the last century. Within the context of this politicization of sexuality, it was intensely discussed and problematized by the feminists and others. Gender identity and discrimination based on gender have assumed bigger proportions in the contemporary political discourse.

I would like to draw your attention to the different attitudes with which people view sex today. For some it is essential, namely, a natural instinct or need. They fear that suppressing sexual needs would end up in physical and psychological damages. Those people who are interested in accumulating as much experiences as possible consider it as yet an experience and try to take themselves into different levels of sexual experience with different people. Another group is worried about sexual compatibility. They are no longer satisfied with emotional, spiritual, and intellectual compatibility. They view sex as an occasion for experiment. There is a group which considers that any type of true love is to be expressed in the form of sexual relation. Sex for them is an opportunity for expression. "It is free, it's fun – let's do it!" is the attitude of many who consider sex as sheer entertainment.

Though some may find one or another of these dimensions needs to be taken into serious consideration, the real human sexuality as the fundamental aspect of one's personal identity, marked by one's relationships is not to be exclusively evaluated by them. Sexuality as an integral and essential aspect of human personal identity and selfhood aims at the wellbeing and wholeness of a person.

Sexuality is the God-given "relational rootedness," which is a gift and a task at the same time. Many of you have confused sexuality with genitality. Human sexuality has several dimensions, while animal sexuality has only two dimensions, body and instinct. Human sexuality has corporeal, psychological, emotional, ethical, spiritual, personal, social, and cultural aspects. Understood and exercised correctly and in a healthy manner, sexuality can have enriching dimensions, whereas every unhealthy approach would only create distracting, disturbing, and destructive impact on human personality, family, and society.

You may recall well the background of my extensive exhortations on sexuality to the Corinthian community. It was the less flagrant sexual problems at Corinth than incest evoked my most extended discussions of sexuality. Their distorted eschatology led some to be libertine, wielding the slogan "everything is permissible for me" (1 Cor. 6:12) and others to be ascetic, under the banner "it is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman" (1 Cor. 7:1). In meeting these challenges, I laid the groundwork for a holistic and flexible understanding of Christian sexuality.

To deal with the blatantly intolerable perversion of Christian freedom, I have applied the rich concept of body (*soma*), which may mean a persons physical nature (1 Cor. 6:13) and the whole human self (1 Cor. 6:15; 1 Cor. 6:19). To my mind, the body is not a mere external expression of the true person. It is truer to say that a human being is a body rather than has a body. Hence, when I declared *porneia* to be uniquely a sin against one's own body (1 Cor. 6:18), I was not referring merely to the misuse of our sexual organs. As sexual activity embodies the whole person, sinful union with a prostitute – adultery or other extra-marital intercourse – desecrates a Christian's bodily union with Christ. I want you to understand the association between Christ and the believer as close as and as physical as that between two partners in the sexual act.

False Gospels on Sexuality

I am sure that my letters have provided plentiful inspiration for advocates of sexual renunciation. What I intended in 1 Cor. 7 was to moderate rather than encourage sexual renunciation. In the course of history, Christian ideals promoted virginity and sexual abstinence for men as well as women because they thought that sexual desires prevented them from concentrating on spirituality in the furtherance of the coming of the kingdom of heaven, and in preparation for the after life.

Those in the second century who embraced my stress on bodily holiness and its link to union with Christ soon developed a notion that the risen Christ offered each human being a mystical union that excluded as bigamous a simultaneous union to a human spouse. I doubt whether some of the Fathers of the Church developed a gloomy attitude towards sexual matters. For some devout disciples, like St. Augustine, sex was produced by concupiscence – sinful desire – and he considered human beings' fall from grace as expressing the victory of the corruptions of the flesh over moral will power. So, it is true that gradually there developed a notable hostility towards sex.

I understand that the attitude of some Christians towards marriage was also not very encouraging in the early centuries. Early Christians saw family as an obstacle to religious devotion and marriage as a dangerous temptation of the flesh. Some people took fight against spiritual pollution from lustful desires by resorting to the extreme acts of castrating themselves or retreating into the deserts.

Though in the late centuries, the Church has developed a more positive, healthy and integral approach towards sexuality, I feel that the telling influence of Christian tradition over the centuries has made sex something to be despised. The idealization of sexual abstinence has compelled the modern Christians to feel that traditional Christianity attached undue importance to sexual morality and made it too restrictive. I feel that such a disintegrating and unhealthy attitude continues to work as a catalyst behind the contemporary degrading challenges of sex.

Sexuality: A Gift

At this juncture, let me reiterate some of my own understanding on sexuality. God created human beings as male and female and saw that it was good. Sexuality, then, in its fullness, is a good gift of God. Since God gives the gift, He also makes the ground rules for the gift's use. In one of the early churches (Ephesus) there was a problem with false teachers (1 Tim. 4.1-5). Amongst their diabolical heresies, they "forbid people to marry." In order to correct this false teaching, I reiterated the biblical view that whatever God created is good and should not be rejected but received with thanksgiving.

Intra-Trinitarian Love in Sex

Sexuality is an aspect of creation which reflects something of the essence of God. Human sexual relationships are reflective of the intra-Trinitarian love of God – a love that reaches out specifically to the others, rather than to the self. This love is particularly symbolized in the differentiation of male-female relationships. The polarity of the male-female marriage relationship (Eph. 5:25-33) is, thus, able to be seen as a special sign of the essential nature of the love of God. If love is the only determinant of a relationship, then those who indulge in all kinds of sexual pleasures in spite of gender difference may argue that he or she "loves them all." The Christian ethic of sexuality is not rooted in any culture to be manipulated as desired, but is to be firmly grounded in this Trinitarian theology. There should be mutual sharing, self-giving love, and deep and lasting commitment in any sexual relationship. The specific sexual union between a man and a woman which I have mentioned in Eph. 5:31 excludes the idea of homosexual marriages as much as the notion that human sexuality is either a playground to be used without obligations, or some piece of machinery whose use and perfection must be learned from technical experts and methods and tools prescribed by them.

Sexuality as a God-given Relational Rootedness

I urge you to understand sexuality as a God-given relational rootedness, which is a gift and a task, at the same time. If we understand the real meaning of this relatedness, then I think many of the current issues will be solved. In my early writings, what I have stressed is this relatedness of human sexuality in the areas of marriage, family, and virginity. I think that the ability to accept and care for oneself, as well as to accept and care for the other, requires the acceptance and healthy integration of one's own sexuality and the sexuality of the other. This is what I have discussed in my early exhortation in the letters to the Ephesians and the Corinthians. For me, there is no acceptable context for physical expression of sex except within marriage. The implication of 1 Cor. 7:12 is clear enough: the satisfying of sexual desires within marriage is not wrong. Moreover, sex is not a dispensable dimension of marriage, like responsible love and respect. The underlying assumption of 1 Cor. 7:2-4 is that by divine appointment marriage and sexual relations go together, as do singleness and abstinence from sex. I consider sexual relations as expressions of selfless mutuality between married partners, of their belonging to each other in the Lord, and not to himself or herself.

In 1 Cor. 7:29-35, my preference is for the unmarried and widowed to remain so, like myself. But I recommend marriage for those who lack charisma of sex to face singleness. But I am not ranking celibacy or virginity above marriage on some absolute scale.

Among the questions the Corinthian letter had posed about "virgins" was the wisdom of the engaged couples proceeding to get married. You should note the implication of the description of the fiancée as "his virgin" (7:36-38); it is assumed that an engaged woman is a virgin until married. Listen, all the proponents of pre-marital sex!

Note that pre-marital sex is not a mini-marriage, but it encroaches upon the holy ground of marriage in an unacceptable way. Physical union should not take place outside of a "one flesh" (i.e., marriage) union. The point is that to be united with someone other than one's spouse is to tear oneself away from Christ with whom one is spiritually united as a Christian.

Bodies Are Temples, Not Idols

My sexual ethic may be seen almost utopian to this sex-besotted age, in which it appears at times that one's identity is made to reside in one's genitality. I had preached a strong doctrine of the holiness of the body, as the temple of the Holy Spirit, which is destined to enjoy resurrection, while sexual misconduct severed the body from Christ. In 1 Cor. 6:13, I have mentioned that casual sex is definitely not as trivial as satisfying a physical hunger. Sex cannot be mere casual or promiscuous, simply because it is an act uniquely expressive of one's whole being. But a cavalier freedom in sexual behaviour can be bought only at the cost of trivializing the human person. Any kind of sex outside marriage – be it gay or straight, prostitution, incest, or bestiality – will destroy the sacredness of human body. I have clearly mentioned in my letters that body (*soma*) is not merely the carnal body, but the immediate medium of our sharing in the material creation. It is the medium for us to share the creative love of God. This creative love demands mutual self-giving and sharing. In that sense sexuality involves more than our genitals. More fundamentally, it is the emotional, cognitive, physical, and spiritual need for intimate communion. So, remember my exhortation: "… the body is not meant for immorality" (1 Cor. 6:13), "Flee sexual immorality (*porneia*) and pursue self-control" (1 Thess. 4:1-8), etc., constitute the straightforward message to Christians in a sex-crazy world.

I propose mutuality, including sexual mutuality, within marriage as a response to the challenges of increasing sexual violence and exaggerated insistence on individual sexual rights. Sex is "meaningful" in the context of a relationship, unless it is a one-night-stand or infidelity, in which case it ought to be meaning*less*! These limits are widely accepted in society. That there must be limits on sexual activity is not at issue; what people object to is more specifically the limit (or context) which God sets for sex: the whole hue and cry is only against a heterosexual, monogamous, lifelong marriage. Indeed, we might say that it is God's wedding present to husband and wife that is being blown with the winds.

Mind of Jesus

My dear brothers and sisters, what I want to exhort you today is to have the mind of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus deliberately wished to disassociate his proclamation of the kingdom of God from the standard attitude toward human existence that one finds in other contemporary religions, where sex consistently played a large, if not a central, part. Jesus was fully a human being, with sexual desires and with an understanding of sexual struggle. He, however, subordinated the genital expression of that sexuality in order to leave himself completely free for the fulfilment of his mission. This sublimation represents a change in the goal as well as the object of the powerful sexual drive, putting its enormous energies at the service of some other higher value. He also warned against any kind of 'commodification' of women even in thoughts. He stressed the need of mutuality in marriage. He himself made love the core of his message and ministry. Nowhere does he, even in his teachings of self-denial, condemn sexual pleasure. His concern always seems to be the wholeness, the spiritual wellbeing, and loving relationship of persons. Jesus, the perfect human being, was a sexually integrated human being. Let this attitude be yours while living in the contemporary society.

Sexuality as a Blessing

My honest wish and prayer at this juncture is that you must understand sexuality as a blessing and a gift. The interest in or appreciation for the interpersonal mutual aspects of human relationship is to be encouraged among you for a healthy sexual culture. Sexuality is, in the first place, energy – energy for relationships. Sexuality can be best understood when it is rooted in the communion-making energy that is close to the heart of creation. It should concern affectivity and the aptitude for forming bounds of communing will provide a context in which human relationship can be celebrated in their diversity, complexity and beauty that would encompass the love of spouses, the warmth of friendship, the bonds of family, colleagues, soul mates, and every generous service. If we create an attitude of belongingness instead of possessiveness, we will be living out sexuality as a blessing.

Final Greetings

Finally, I recall my words to the Romans, which is a key to understand my ethics: "Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice" (Rom. 12:1). In a sex-dominated world, where people struggle to face the challenges of sexuality, may your lives become living sacrifices to God, who is love!

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit!

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Microfilms: University Microfilms International, Michigan, Religious & Theological Abstracts: Myerstown, PA 17067.

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Reg. No. R.N. 27399/75 ISSN: 0253-7222

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Published by
Dharma Research Association
Centre for the Study of World Religions
Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, 560 029 Bangalore, India

Visit Journal of Dharma at www.dharma.dvk.in

Printed at
National Printing Press
560 095 Bangalore, India